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If there is an unstageable: a synchronic exploration

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**If there is an unstageable:
a synchronic exploration.**

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This thesis is submitted for examination for the award of PhD.

Department of English

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August 2013

Abstract

The contemporary theatrical and performative trope that anything is stageable is strengthened and supported as technology mounts, as genres and media expand and traverse each others' boundaries, and as the question of what theatre is, what performance is, becomes an ever-widening gyre of possibility. My doctoral thesis reflects on this breadth of expansion and observes its counterpart, the unstageable. A study of this chimerical term presents a shifting terrain of language, time, and context, and situates itself tangentially to, though not within, discussions of concepts of failure and impossibility in theatre and performance studies.

Focusing on three examples drawn from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries respectively, the thesis' case studies begin to suggest an alternative view of the history of staging, a history which tends to focus upon what theatre has been able to stage, and rarely upon what it has not. Taking this synchronic route through recent theatre history, and illuminating points of unstageability with the theoretical aid of Jacques Rancière's writing on the unrepresentable in response to Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of the unrepresentable, the thesis' examples engage with the broad spectrum of the term's history, without suggesting a diachronic evolution or overview of its position in the field.

Invoking the world premiere of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in 1876, and the demise of the Parisian Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in 1962, the first two case studies in the thesis engage with the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge in particular historical contexts. Returning to the twenty-first century, the recent work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio invites a dialogue regarding unstageability now, and the implications that this shifting signifier may continue to have for theatre and performance.

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Introduction

In 1936, the first English language translation of Constantin Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* was published.¹ In this study of the actor's craft, still considered to be required reading for many university theatre studies programmes and actor training courses, Stanislavski discusses, among a range of other things, his concept of 'magic if'. Using this notion, actors can place themselves into the reality of the character they are playing using the imagination, and the 'given circumstances' of the character's situation.² For example, the book asks the actor what they would do if a 'violently insane' man who had escaped from a psychiatric hospital was on the other side of a door from them.³ The actor in this context thinks through what they would do if they found themselves in the character's position, and acts accordingly. Stanislavski's character of Tortsov in *An Actor Prepares*, a heavily autobiographical director figure who discusses the principal aspects of his practice with a group of acting students, notes that '[t]his word [if] has a peculiar quality, a kind of power'.⁴ Referring to the specific example given above, he also mentions that the word provokes a certain stimulus in the actor:

Take into consideration also that this inner stimulus was brought about without force, and without deception. I did not tell you that there was a madman behind the door. On the contrary, by using the word *if* I frankly recognized the fact that I was offering you only a supposition... You in turn did not force yourselves, or make yourselves accept the supposition as reality, but only as a supposition.⁵

I invoke this particular example drawn from a significant twentieth century theatre practitioner's work, because it speaks to the central concerns of this thesis in a number

¹ This was translated by Elizabeth Reynolds-Hapgood and published in America in 1936. The edition I have consulted is the 1988 reprint, published by Routledge/Theatre Arts Books.

² Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. by Elizabeth Reynolds-Hapgood (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1988), p. 51.

³ Stanislavski, p. 45.

⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

of ways. Firstly, Stanislavski's position in theatre history, a strong advocate of Realism, on the threshold of Modernism, but with the echoes of Romanticism still reverberating behind him, represents an interesting departure point for the trajectory of the thesis' examples.⁶ From the first production of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in the late nineteenth century, to the demise of the Parisian Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in mid-twentieth century, to the work of Romeo Castellucci in the early twenty-first century, I will be attempting to navigate a course through recent theatre history that focuses on the concept of the unstageable. I will be considering the ways in which the possibilities of the unstageable emerge through the situation of each of these theatrical examples within their specific historical contexts.

My suggested definition of unstageable, in historical, philosophical and theatrical terms, will be explored below. However, before such an explanation is attempted, I will note that general ideas of theatrical realism, in terms of what Raymond Williams has referred to as 'a particular artistic method...conceiving realism in terms of a particular attitude towards what is called "reality"...a permanent possibility of choice for any particular

⁶ A few points on definitions and capitalisations. Firstly, Romanticism and Modernism (and their glossings as terms and cultural movements) will be specifically discussed in Chapter One, as they pertain particularly to the examination of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. These terms are used in the upper-case form throughout in adherence to the MHRA Style Guide, which states that '[c]apitals must be used...for literary and other movements when the use of a lower-case initial might cause confusion with the same word in a more general sense' (e.g. 'romantic'). *MHRA Style Guide*, 3rd edn. (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2013), p. 41. However, I will be using 'naturalism' and 'realism' in a combination of upper-case and lower-case forms throughout, as I am not always referring to the specific artistic movements, but often to the perceived verisimilitude of theatrical representation in various aspects at a particular time in history, and both of these words have come to signify parts of this perception. Throughout, when any such terms are used by others in quotations, I quote verbatim, including capitalisation. I have used the capitalised 'Realism' here in order to refer to Stanislavski's own understanding of the term. As Jean Benedetti notes in *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, '[i]t is important to define what Stanislavski understood by the term Realism and to distinguish it from Naturalism, a word which he normally employed in a purely pejorative sense. Naturalism, for him, implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, while taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the relationships and tendencies lying under the surface'. Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 17.

artist', function as a way of thinking about this project, with Williams' caution regarding the historical fluctuations of such an emphasis firmly in mind.⁷ Within the thesis' confines, the work of the theatre practitioners I have named (and their audiences) in relation to unstageability appears to be informed by what is accepted as 'real' on the stage at a particular time in history (a project to which Stanislavskian Realism - including concepts such as 'magic if' - has arguably contributed). In such a suggestion, I acknowledge the complexities of the theatrical realism of any historical time, and indeed the more general difficulties that arise in relation to this term that is, as Williams continues,

not an object, to be identified, pinned down, and appropriated. It is, rather, a way of describing certain methods and attitudes, and the descriptions, quite naturally, have varied, in the ordinary exchange and development of experience.⁸

Such a notion of the acceptance by the theatre audience of what is representative of their reality on stage, necessarily characterised by the social or political context of the theatres and audiences of any given time, will be returned to throughout the thesis, anchoring the examples (and the unstageable) in historical specificity.

Further to this, Stanislavski's historical bearings, as well the details of his work, allow me to introduce the sense that my thesis subject and the questions it raises are concerns that are specific to the twentieth century in many ways. Of course, the first production of *Peer Gynt* falls outside of such a remit, as does a discussion of the origins of unstageability, which has its roots in ancient Greek literary criticism and Enlightenment philosophy. However, Ibsen's play (including the details of its composition and production) is, for me, a vital illustration of the post-Romanticist, pre-Modernist theatrical landscape from which key aspects of twentieth century theatre practice

⁷ Raymond Williams, 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen*, 18:1 (1977), 61-74 (p. 73).

⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Broadview Press, 2001), p. 300.

subsequently developed, and thus remains a central example for my thesis' discussion of historical unstageability in theatre. Additionally, the continuing use of the concept of unstageability in the twenty-first century, despite the preceding century's plurality of theatrical Modernisms, leads me to examine the concept in the light of the twentieth century. This period, in which European theatre simultaneously explored the possibilities of Realism, and on the other hand investigated the staging of the previously-considered unrepresentable, or the staging of the awareness that *there is* something non-presentable (as Jean-François Lyotard would have it), continues to provoke thought on the subject of unstageability and where (and how) it might emerge. Similarly, using the examples of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol and Romeo Castellucci, acknowledging the former's demise in relation to the trauma of the Second World War and the latter's twenty-first century work through a post-Holocaust lens, expose a set of twentieth century concerns that continue to influence the possibilities of unstageability.

Finally, the focus on Stanislavski's 'magic if' reveals an alliance with the thesis title, 'If there is an unstageable'. For me, the 'if' in my title represents an offer quite similar to the one Tortsov makes above, the offer of a supposition. The thesis does not attempt to make a superficial or general overview of the function of the unstageable throughout theatre history, though the historical contextualisations of the term and the examples are vital situational work. Nor does it, to use Stanislavski's phrasing, 'tell' the reader that there is an unstageable. Rather, this thesis invites the reader to explore, through a small, wide-ranging selection of examples drawn from recent theatre history, the apparent historical necessity that there indeed be 'an unstageable' within the various developments of theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Crucially, it is this sense of the existence of something called unstageable, hinted at in descriptions of plays seen staged, that suggests that the unstageable and the not stageable are distinct and

divisible. The ongoing development of theatrical technology presents continuing opportunities for the theatre to stage any number of playwrights' imaginings, or directors' vision. However, in the context of this thesis, I aim to uncover the idea that there could be a more abstract sense of the impossibility of staging, a theatrically-specific one that is less to do with the capacity of theatres to stage, and more to do with theatre's pursuit of the future (where various things will be stageable that are currently unstageable) or rejection of the past (where various things are now unstageable that were previously unstageable).

In my exploration of unstageability, I hope to discuss some alternative definitions of the word with the aid of theorists exploring similarly ambiguous terms; to situate the word and its usages within some contemporary theatre and performance studies currents; to examine some of the questions related to its use and misuse; and to move from this introductory section towards an illustration of these points with case study examples. These wide-ranging examples will endeavour to capture the historical and geographical breadth of the implications of the unstageable's paradoxical existence, as word and concept. Crucially, however, I do not suggest that this work presents a survey or overview of the history of the unstageable, nor is it a mapping or tracing of its origins or roots, (though some etymological outlining will be carried out in order to discuss definitions). Indeed, I aim to apply the linguistic sense of 'synchrony', as employed by Ferdinand de Saussure, to the effect created by the use of seemingly disparate examples here. The idea of presenting a short series of 'snapshots' or discrete cross-sections of space and time in order to illustrate my research and thoughts in this thesis is most helpful to me methodologically. The historical, social, political and theatrical specificities of each example will hopefully combine with this synchronic approach to provide an attempt to bypass a summation of the word's use in relation to theatre and

performance, and to instead articulate the particular moments when, if there is an unstageable, its possibilities can be noted.

In exploring this topic, the notion of supposition as outlined above has been a useful anchor in terms of an acknowledgement of the ongoing challenges of explaining the impermanence of unstageability. Further to this, the phrase from which I have constructed my thesis title is based on my re-translation of the titular question posed in an essay by the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. The book from which the essay is taken, *Le destin des images*, was published in 2003, and translated by Gregory Elliott as *The Future of the Image* in 2007. It consists of five essays examining various aspects of our contemporary relationship with the image, invoking a range of film-makers, visual artists, and twentieth-century theorists as illustrative and supportive examples. The fifth and final essay in this collection, translated by Elliott as ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’ ponders the hyperbolic use of the phrase ‘the unrepresentable’, and wonders aloud whether there are conditions under which the word’s use is appropriate. Rancière’s work here, and its origins as a response to an essay by Jean-François Lyotard, holds a significant position in my thesis, and will be unpacked in more detail below. I mention it, ahead of time as it were, due to its relation to my thesis title. Rancière’s original composition of the title of the essay is ‘*S’il y a de l’irreprésentable*’, and my own translation of this from French to English reveals the phrase ‘If there is an unrepresentable’, which stands in some opposition to Elliott’s ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’ Rancière’s French title, for me, indicates a certain doubt as to the existence of an unrepresentable or not in the first place. It seems that, for Rancière, there may or may not be an unrepresentable. However, Elliott disposes of this doubt in his translation by his usage of the word ‘things’. In this translation, it seems that things exist which may or may not be unrepresentable, and the unrepresentable itself is not

questioned. This idea of a gap between Rancière and his translator in this particular case does some more useful work for this thesis below, and for now I merely wish to draw the reader's attention to the construction of my title, and the ambiguity inherent in 'If there is an unstageable', my direct translation of Rancière's essay title.

Remaining briefly with Elliott's English translation of Rancière's title 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' it is necessary to mention 'some things' with which I will illustrate my questioning of the unstageable's existence. The 'some things', in this case, are some examples of theatre and performance, namely the first production of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, the late period of the Parisian Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, and two pieces by the Italian performance company Societas Raffaello Sanzio, produced between 2003 and 2011. All of these examples were performed in theatres. All had authors (or, in some cases, auteurs) and directors. All were staged, and stageable. So why illustrate a thesis discussing the unstageable with examples of what has already been staged? This paradox is part of what I question about the word and its familiar use. Each of these examples has been associated with different aspects of unstageability, despite being staged. The manner in which this will be related to each example will be outlined below, but I mention them now in order to suggest the theatrical framework within which I will operate. Already, it seems, the word 'unstageable' begins to depart from what, etymologically, it might be thought to mean, the word 'stage' couched by a prefix and suffix indicating, among other things, impossibility. With the aid of my thesis examples, the questioning of unstageability deepens to allow its positioning itself in the vicinity of current academic debate regarding notions of impossibility and failure, both in terms of theoretical and practical study, and regarding the various methods of approach considered when work is done on a specific word.

While my core argument revolves around an examination of uses of the word ‘unstageable’, I think there is more at play in this word than is suggested in its current usage. As I will show, its hyperbolic use (and misuse) as a term tends to describe something that is difficult or expensive to stage in the theatre, or something that is traumatic or harrowing to watch on stage. Over the course of this thesis, I aim to interrupt this inflated sense of the word, which approaches a turn of phrase, and am questioning whether there is something that could be called unstageable in theatre, or if the word has become too problematic to use outside of its current aphoristic connotations. I begin to suggest that the word could instead refer to the role of historical / geographical / cultural specificity inherent in what cannot be staged, that something could be stageable at one particular moment in time, and unstageable at another. This argument develops a line of questioning initially suggested by Jacques Rancière in a response to an essay by Jean-François Lyotard. Invoking the example of Pierre Corneille’s re-working of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* in France in 1659, Rancière discusses what he refers to the ‘literally unrepresentable’.⁹ However, the roots of the unstageable, and the origins of the work of these thinkers are to be found much earlier, and in the use of different terms of language.

From ancient Greek sublime to 21st century unstageable

The notion of the unstageable, both as a word and as a concept, has a legacy extending back in time and encompassing a range of terms and ideas, necessitating the articulation of a clear definition and historicisation of the term, and its usage in the context of the thesis. For me, such a legacy involves not just the term ‘unstageable’, but a trajectory of language which allows me to extrapolate my own thoughts and research on

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 112.

unstageability. As will be shown, the historical tracing of the notion of unstageability has as much to do with meaning as with etymology and linguistic origin. Thus, my trajectory moves from ideas of the Burkean and Kantian sublime, initially stimulated by Longinus' writings on the subject in the first century AD, through to Kant's notion of unrepresentability in the late eighteenth century, which is taken up by Lyotard in the twentieth century.¹⁰ The latter incorporates a discussion of unrepresentability into his work on unrepresentability. It is at this point that Jacques Rancière, in 2003 challenges Lyotard's unrepresentable, though suggesting a 'literal unrepresentable' as a possible caveat, a condition under which unrepresentability might be said to function. Such a condition, operating arguably as a theatrically-specific subset of unrepresentability more generally, is where ideas of the unstageable begin to resonate for me.

It is through analyses of various aspects of the sublime, as explored initially by the ancient Greek writer Longinus, and subsequently discussed by Burke, Kant and Lyotard amongst others, that ideas of unrepresentability and unrepresentability have become a fixture of European philosophy since the eighteenth century. In *On The Sublime*, written in the first century AD, Longinus defines the sublime both in terms of how it is distinguishable from other writing, and how certain kinds of style can be destructive to sublimity, concluding with a diatribe regarding the lack of great (sublime) authors in his own time. The fragmentary treatise refers to the power of language in poetry or prose to engender strong or even overwhelming feelings in the listener or reader, 'a certain loftiness and excellence of language' which 'takes [the reader or listener] out of

¹⁰ Another possible pathway through, from the Longinean sublime to my discussion of the unstageable, could have discussed Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's exploration of the sublime and non-presentation, looking specifically at Paul Celan's writing. In *Poetry as Experience*, Lacoue-Labarthe notes that Lyotard has constructed a 'formula' of the unrepresentable from the work of Kant, and that his (Lyotard's) attempt to '[present] that the unrepresentable exists' is faulty due to the impossibility of the unrepresentable to present itself, which differs from Rancière's critique of Lyotard. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. by Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 90.

himself”.¹¹ For Longinus, this sublimity of language can be traced to any of five possible sources (or a combination of more than one) relating to the construction of the writing and/or the drive behind it, including ‘grandeur of thought...treatment of the passions...the employment of figures [of speech]...dignified expression...majesty and elevation of structure’.¹² In this mode, the effect of sublime language on the person listening is that ‘it does not merely convince the hearer, but enthralls him’.¹³ Thus, in the first century AD, it is possible to discover (through Longinus) a certain sense of beyond, something that surpasses. In *On The Sublime*, the sublime writer’s work must ‘extend beyond what is actually expressed’, and the reader or listener should accordingly be affected ‘beyond the mere act of perusal’.¹⁴ Further to this, Longinus, in his discussion of the phrasal action of ‘taking the reader or listener out of themselves’, does not, of course, specify *where* the reader or listener is taken *to* in their reaction to the sublimity of language, though he is suggesting that they are taken beyond themselves in some way. For me, these ideas suggest that the lineage of the sense of unstageability to which I will be referring in this thesis can be found in such early work on sublimity in language.

While Longinus’ sense of the sublime is not directly comparable to my twenty-first century discussion of the unstageable, but contributes significantly to the trajectory of language with which I am articulating a definition, it should be noted that there are some interesting points of accord. To begin with, Longinus notes that ‘grasp[ing] some definite theory and criterion of the true Sublime...is a hard matter’, and the paradoxical challenges of defining the sublime, the unrepresentable, the unrepresentable, and thus the

¹¹ Longinus, *On The Sublime*, trans. by H.L. Havell (London and New York: Macmillan & Co., 1890) p. 2. Project Gutenberg ebook.

¹² Ibid., p. 13.

¹³ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

unstageable, remain key to my work, and to the work of the writers exploring these subjects, whose endeavours will be examined below.¹⁵ Additionally, the centrality of the imagination of the hearer of sublime language is an important link to theatre, and Longinus specifically mentions that, in succumbing to the kind of feeling occasioned by the sublime, the poet ‘imagines himself to see what he is talking about, and produces a similar illusion in his hearers’.¹⁶ However, from Longinus’ positive depiction of sublimity for both the poet and the listener, the development of notions of the sublime by Edmund Burke and others in the eighteenth century begin to move towards a certain sense of anxiety about its invocation, which is a significant aspect of the ideas of unrepresentability and unrepresentability that follow with the work of Lyotard and Rancière.

Longinus’ work was translated into English for the first time in 1652 by the poet John Hall, but was not mentioned in critical work in English until the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ It was at this point, that the work of critics such as John Dennis and Joseph Addison began to resurrect the idea of the sublime, though they were specifically moving the discussion in the direction of the sublime in nature, and the work of the observer of nature as distinct from the hearer of sublime language, in the Longinian tradition. Furthermore, Dennis and Addison (amongst others) began to distinguish the beautiful from the sublime in natural contexts, and were particularly concerned with the positive aspect of the Longinian sublime.¹⁸ For example, Addison,

¹⁵ Longinus, p. 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁷ Indeed, Karl Axelson notes that Hall’s translation ‘was barely read at the time’. Karl Axelson, *The Sublime: Precursors and British Eighteenth Century Conceptions* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 22. Similarly, Charles Martindale states that Hall’s translation ‘had little currency’. Charles Martindale, ‘Milton’s Classicism’ in *The Oxford of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. by David Hopkins and Charles Martindale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 89 n. 93.

¹⁸ Contemporary critics such as Peter de Bolla, Anne Janowitz and Janet Todd have suggested that this emphasis on the sublime during the Enlightenment was directly related to the need to

in an article in *Spectator* in 1712, lists a number of pastoral descriptions and relates how observers are ‘flung into a pleasing astonishment at such unbounded views, and feel a delightful stillness and amazement in the soul at the apprehension of them’.¹⁹

Following on from this, and specifically in an attempt to identify whether such feelings originated in the image seen or in the mind of the observer, Edmund Burke’s concept of the sublime, articulated in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, was established. Burke, in this work, uses one of the principal medical discourses of the time, the nerves, to suggest that the mind and body are interrelated, and that external sensations work on the mind and thus the sublime is produced from within, as a form of ‘exercise of the finer parts of the [nervous] system’.²⁰ He discusses the sublime in terms of ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’, and from the beginning of his treatise, connects the sublime with terror and pain. An example of Burke’s contrast with previous work in this area can be seen in his definition of the effects of sublimity, described above by Addison as a sense of being ‘flung into a pleasing astonishment’, but noted by Burke as ‘that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror’.²¹

replace religious terror with a secular equivalent. The terrifying sense that, post-Galileo, there was a range of unknowns relating to the universe, allowed an underside of the sublime to be exposed, and for some writers of the time, this led to an acknowledgement that there were things we don’t know. Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Anne Janowitz, ‘Sublime’ in *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies*, ed. by Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright (Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 55-68; Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986).

¹⁹ Quoted in David Sandner, *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic: 1712-1831*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), p. 33.

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of nerves and nervous disease in the eighteenth century, and their connection to the Burkean sublime, see Aris Sarafianos, ‘The Contractility of Burke’s Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69:1 (2008), 23-48.

²¹ Longinus, p. 130.

Burke's exploration of the sublime in dark and psychological terms is an important one for the purpose of my definitions of the unrepresentable and the unstageable. However, it is not merely the internal explanation of the sublime that relates to later examinations of unrepresentability, but also Burke's discussion of the specific kinds of external sensations applicable to the internal development of the feeling. Hildebrand Jacob in *The works* (1735) had made a list of prompts to the natural sublime discussed by critics such as Dennis and Addison, including oceans, mountains, and moonlight, but also including 'great ruins...magnificence of architecture...and things in fine statues or paintings'.²² Implicit in this list is the suggestion that the representation of a landscape, in a painting for example, could provoke the same feeling as the actual landscape. In short, for Jacob (as well as Dennis and Addison), the feeling of sublimity could be induced with the re-creation or representation of a sublime prompt. Burke disagreed with this. Though he does not cite Jacob specifically, he discusses in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* the difference between representation and reality. In a section entitled 'On the Effects of Tragedy', Burke notes that representation 'is never so perfect, but we can perceive it is imitation'.²³ In an anecdotal supplement to this point, he notes that a 'most sublime and affecting tragedy' could be performed with high production values and a captive audience, but that an announcement in the theatre reporting that 'a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square' would cause the theatre to empty.²⁴ Burke here is illustrating 'the comparative weakness of the imitative arts' to provoke a feeling of sublimity in the spectator.²⁵ For me, this is an aspect of Burke's work in this area in which a sense of the unrepresentable and unrepresentable's

²² Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 53.

²³ Longinus, p. 120.

²⁴ Longinus, p. 120.

²⁵ Ibid.

possibilities comes into play. Burke implies in this anecdote that there is something that remains out of reach for the theatre at a certain moment of crisis, something that art, even sublime art, is incapable of doing. Over two hundred years later, in ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’ Rancière discusses the ‘incapacity on the part of art’ in relation to art’s inability to represent ‘certain entities, events or situations’.²⁶ However, before turning to an examination of Rancière’s writings on this topic, I will return to the eighteenth century, and the development of (and opposition to) Burke’s ideas by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*.

For Kant, writing in 1790, the sublime convinces the mind that it possesses ‘a power surpassing any standard of sense’.²⁷ Additionally, the Kantian sublime is divided into two, the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. In the former, the feeling of sublimity arises in relation to an inability to grasp the concept of infinity, and the idea that an awareness of this inability (and an awareness that infinity exists as a concept) gives the observer of this a pleasurable sense that ‘merely to be able to think the given infinite without contradictions requires a faculty in the mind that is itself supersensible’.²⁸ In other words, when the imagination attempts to comprehend the object it is faced with in a rational way, but cannot. The mind cannot make a whole out of whatever is being thought of or observed, but the fact that this inability is perceptible causes the feeling of sublimity, because there is an awareness of what the complete object/quantity might be, even if the mind or imagination cannot grasp it. The dynamic sublime relates more directly to nature, and the feeling that nature’s power is frightening, but that the human mind is independent of and superior to nature. However, the pleasure associated with

²⁶ Rancière, p. 109-10.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 106.

²⁸ Quoted in Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 33.

both of these aspects of the Kantian sublime is also troubling, and Kant refers to the ‘rapidly alternating repulsion...and attraction’ of the mind in relation to the inadequacy of the human imagination in the face of the mathematical sublime, and the powerlessness of the human being when faced with nature.²⁹

Lyotard brought this idea through to art, and to concepts of unrepresentability in art specifically. In Lyotard’s *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, he notes that Kant’s sublime, as described above, can be read in terms of the presentation that there is an unrepresentable. For Lyotard, the Kantian mathematical sublime ‘becomes unrepresentable for the faculty of presentation’, in this case the imagination.³⁰ In Lyotard’s *The Inhuman*, he states that the nature of this unrepresentable is that ‘for which one cannot show (present) an example, a case, even a symbol. The universe is unrepresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good etc’.³¹ In this sense, the sublime is unrepresentable because by its nature it eludes representation. However, returning to Lyotard, ‘one cannot present the absolute [Kant’s collective term – in this context – for Lyotard’s list of unrepresentables above]. But one can present that there is some absolute’.³² Thus, for Lyotard, the fact that something is not presented is not equivalent to its non-existence. Thus, it is necessary to present what is unrepresentable, to

²⁹ This is a very brief overview of the Kantian sublime, but Abaci (2010), Clewis (2010) and Crowther (1989), for example, articulate this specifically in relation to art. Uygur Abaci, ‘Artistic Sublime Revisited: Reply to Robert Clewis’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68:2 (2010), pp. 170-173; Robert Clewis, ‘A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity: A Response to Abaci’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68:2 (2010), 167-170; Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Additionally, Bjorn Myskja’s *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2002) looks at *Molloy* as case study example of how Kant’s sublime can be explored in relation to a particular work (cf. pp. 12-59).

³⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 92.

³¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 126.

³² Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 126.

develop a sense that it exists, even if it is not presented.³³ The way to achieve this, according to Lyotard, is to establish a feeling for the unrepresentable, as it cannot itself be represented in words or images. Indeed, in the forward to Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews"*, David Carroll notes that Lyotard 'makes the unrepresentable what all representation must strive to represent and what it must also be aware of not bring able to represent'.³⁴

From here, Rancière takes up a position in opposition to this Lyotardian unrepresentable, as well as a disagreement with Lyotard's use of the Kantian (and Burkean) sublime. I will be discussing the Rancierèan regimes of art in more detail below, but it is important to note initially that for Rancière, representation is a particular arrangement of art that is produced in and by specific historical, social and political contexts, or what he refers to as 'the distribution of the sensible'. In this arrangement, Rancière notes two representational circumstances. The first of these is the Platonic 'straightforward tale, one without artifice', associated with what Rancière refers to as 'the ethical regime of images', and the second is 'a new art of the sublime'.³⁵ It is this second, 'new' representative mode that, for Rancière, '[records] the trace of the

³³ In a larger, more general sense of the Lyotardian *oeuvre*, the presentation of the unrepresentable avoids totalising and the domination of grand narratives.

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, trans. by Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. xiii. Additionally, this Lyotard text presents an important opportunity to distinguish between unrepresentable and unrepresentable. In *Heidegger and "the jews"*, Lyotard argues for the ongoing unrepresentability of the Holocaust in order to do justice to the horror of the event. Referring to the unrepresentable in this case as 'the Forgotten' (or 'the Immemorial'), Lyotard makes a distinction between an everyday notion of forgetting, which is 'representational, reversible', which could be remembered through some kind of representation, and 'a forgetting that thwarts all representation' (p. 5). He suggests that it might be possible to 'forget the crime by representing it', allowing the representations to cloud the enormous wrongness of the event (p. 26). Thus, the Forgotten cannot be remembered through representation and, 'in order not to be forgotten as that which is the forgotten itself, must remain unrepresentable' (p. 26). For Lyotard, therefore, the Holocaust is not only unrepresentable, but unrepresentable.

³⁵ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 110-1.

unthinkable', and relates to Burke and Kant's notions of the sublime.³⁶ Thus, in this sense, unrepresentability arises less from the inability of representation to represent, and more from the historical, social and political shift from one regime into the next. In particular, the shift to the aesthetic regime (or Modernism) heralds a disintegration of the 'rules of appropriateness between a particular subject and a particular form...[in this regime there is] a general availability of all subjects for any artistic form whatsoever'.³⁷

For me, if unrepresentability occurs in the movement between one regime and another, then unstageability can be seen as a theatrically-specific condition of Rancièrian unrepresentability. Contextually contingent, and arising at moments of social or political crisis, or, arguably, at similarly significant moments for theatrical form, incidences of unstageability before, during and after the twentieth century will be explored in this thesis using the three key examples outlined above. This notion of unstageability relates particularly to what I regard as the counterpart of the Lyotardian sense of representing the unrepresentable, or representing that *there is* an unrepresentable. For me, the notion of representing the unrepresentable, or 'staging the unstageable' is articulated in much twentieth century modernist theatre. Martin Puchner has referred to this idea as 'a suspicion of the theatre', and the concept can be traced to the work of theatre practitioners from Artaud to Maeterlinck to Beckett, though of course in different ways.³⁸ Such a sense of suspicion might be referred to idiomatically as 'staging the unstageable' (or staging that there is an unstageable), and would perhaps appear to dispense with the idea of an 'unstageable' existing beyond such work, or beyond a turn of phrase. However, my speculation is that, despite a modernist (and postmodernist) body of workers and work dealing with this notion of staging the (/that

³⁶ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 111.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 118

³⁸ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: modernism, anti-theatricality, and drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 1.

there is an) unstageable, there still appears to be a necessity to have something that we call unstageable, which does not pertain to this modernist and postmodernist sense of staging the unstageable. Thus, this unstageable is distinct from the unrepresentable by virtue of its theatrical specificity.

With this initial trajectory of language and history in place, I will now discuss some of the key features of this thesis' contribution to knowledge and methodologies. Below, I will undertake a further analysis of Rancière's notion of unrepresentability, and how the thesis' sense of unstageability has grown from the philosophical influences I have examined above. Additionally, I will explain some of the etymological origins of unstageability, as well as uncovering an early twentieth century use of the word in literary criticism. Finally, the three key examples that will be explored throughout the thesis will be introduced briefly in their historical and theatrical contexts. Throughout, I will refer to material that allows me to situate my thesis within the fields of theatre and performance studies, and also to differentiate my work from the work of others.

Ways of working

The thesis' contribution to knowledge in the field of theatre and performance studies relates in the first place to some thoughts on recent theatre history. For example, while my thesis presents an alternative way of working through theatre history, it is not a history of alternative theatres. This history has been explored in a range of ways by theorists including Baz Kershaw and Bonnie Marranca, as well as in archival work by Susan Croft and Jessica Higgs, among others, and the history of theatres that have not been visible in the mainstream continues to be a rich and important one.³⁹ However, my

³⁹ Baz Kershaw, ed., *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3: Since 1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Bonnie Marranca, 'Performance: a personal

own work here, while acknowledging the wide spectrum of theatre history from which I draw my case study examples, and upon which foundation much of my knowledge of theatre studies rests, is instead concerned with the articulation of a theatre history that explores, paradoxically, moments of unstageability. The project encourages thought about alternative ways of thinking through recent theatre histories, as distinct from mapping alternative theatre histories. Thinking through a history of what it has not been possible to stage (and, as will be discussed, when it has not been possible to stage it) presents a fertile, if unsteady, terrain of investigation, though it is not my intention to present an overview or general summary of this field. As will be explored more fully below, a diachronic account of the evolution of the term would be futile, as its definition shifts and morphs in correlation with (and sometimes in opposition to) changes in theatrical logistics, theoretical developments, and social mores.

This discussion of another way of thinking about theatre history has a number of contemporary bedfellows, most of whom consider theatre's transience, and the difficulties this presents when attempting to construct or frame a history, or histories. Indeed, as Joseph Roach notes in *Critical Theory and Performance*, the scholarly articulation of theatre and performance histories tends towards a certain melancholy. Contextualizing the disappearance of the multi-volume study of ancient theatre history by Juba II of Mauretania, which was collated in the time of the Roman emperor Augustus but exists only by reference in other writings of the time, Roach describes a 'parable of disinheritance' that is traceable throughout theatre history.⁴⁰ Despite the continuing survival of huge numbers of other pieces of historical material, allowing for a 'hard evidence', fact-based exploration of theatre history in the manner of Robert D.

history', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 28:1 (2006), 3-19; Susan Croft and Jessica Higgs, *Unfinished Histories*, <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com> [accessed 2 August 2012].

⁴⁰ Joseph Roach, 'Theater History and Historiography' in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2007), p. 191.

Hume's 'archaeo-historicist' approach, the 'wistful sense of incompleteness' Roach describes is, for him, due to theatre's inherent ephemerality.⁴¹ Less pensive, and more polemic, Jacky Bratton makes a comprehensive survey of the history of theatre history in the first chapter of *New Readings in Theatre History*, and claims towards the chapter's end that her monograph will 'make approaches to theatre history that challenge and deconstruct (rather than simply overturn) this binary Modernist history', that, for Bratton, is made manifest in, firstly, the polarising of men's and women's work in the theatre, and secondly, in the division between popular theatre and so-called 'high' art.⁴²

I mention a few of these sources, mostly because my own suggests a somewhat contrasting, though perhaps complementary approach. As I have mentioned above, in considering theatre history, it becomes clear that there are questions surrounding both what should be recorded, and how it should be recorded. The examples above present a very small and general sample of both of these lines of enquiries. However, in this project, I am instead attempting to mine the territory that, to some extent, falls between the two, between what is recorded, and how this recording is done. I am thinking about a way of historiographically examining what we have not been able to stage, when staging has become impossible. This is not purely a questioning of what should be / is recorded, though a historical exploration of unstageability necessarily links to what has been staged. Additionally, it is not only a support of alternative methods of discussing theatre history, though the breadth of my thesis' case studies aims to suggest a way of 'doing' theatre history that strays from the confines of time or nation. Rather, the case studies with which I have been working over the course of this project attempt to

⁴¹ Roach, p. 191.

⁴² Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 16.

highlight the specificity of each time and place in turn, examining moments of unstageability with due regard for what the concept of unstageability might mean in specific contexts.

Similarly, while questions of censorship and economic concerns are certainly relevant to this enquiry, they do not constitute it. At stake in this thesis, instead, are some moments of unstageability that are related to theatre's limits at a specific time and in a specific place, taking in questions of logistics and audience response in a small but transhistorical study. Thinking through the structure of this work, and the selection of case studies to be explored, the thesis recalls the synchronic techniques of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the precarious practice by which Walter Benjamin resisted the empirical approach to history 'the way it really was', preferring to 'seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.⁴³ In discussing both of these scholars below, and their influence on my transhistorical work, I attempt to illuminate the aspects of their writing that have shaped what I have done in this thesis, rather than exploring either writer in the same depth as the case studies to which this introductory chapter will lead.

Saussure's writings on synchrony in language indicate a tendency towards specificity that resonates with my own work in this thesis. To study language from the synchronic point of view is to examine it at one particular moment in time. Saussure compares this work to that of a chess game, where the value of the pieces on the board is only temporary, and depends on their relation to the other chess pieces at any one time. He also notes that 'any given state of the board is totally independent of any previous state of the board', and indeed suggests that '[a]nyone who has followed the whole game has not the least advantage over a passer-by who happens to look at the game at that

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 247.

particular moment'.⁴⁴ This examination of synchrony in language suggests some interesting implications for my work on moments of unstageability.

Firstly, the changing capabilities of the stage and sensibilities of the audience, culturally and technologically contingent, engender a constant shifting of what is considered to be unstageable at any one time. While it is certainly possible to think about this ongoing adjustment of theatre's limits diachronically, thus allowing a historical overview of staging to emerge, it seems that my exploration of unstageability speaks more to Saussure's chess board, and the independence of one state of the board from any other. By this I mean that the examination of unstageability at one particular point in time, independent of any other point in time, is the most useful way of discussing the word and its implications in and for theatre. Indeed, Saussure argues that the synchronic study is superior to the diachronic in linguistics, stating that 'if [the linguist] takes a diachronic point of view, he is no longer examining the language, but a series of events which modify it'.⁴⁵ With this in mind, I have chosen to explore three case studies from three different centuries and countries, perhaps becoming a version of Saussure's passer-by chess spectator. Additionally, in happening to look at unstageability at a particular moment, as Saussure's synchronic evaluation does with language, I acknowledge his assertion in *Course in General Linguistics* that 'the term *synchronic*, in fact, is not sufficiently precise. *Idiosynchronic* would be a better term, even though it is cumbersome'.⁴⁶ The specificity of Saussure's synchrony examines 'only the set of facts corresponding to any particular language', and thus, for him, requires a further qualifier to render the specific doubly acknowledged.⁴⁷ The prefix 'idio-', meaning

⁴⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by R. Harris (London: Duckworth, 1972), p. 88.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 90, his emphasis).

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 89-90.

‘own’ or ‘distinct’, allows this acknowledgement, though Saussure makes it clear that he considers the expression unwieldy.

In another way, the late work of Walter Benjamin has helped to shape the work I have done in this thesis. The ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, particularly in terms of Benjamin’s thoughts on approaches to historical thinking and writing, has been influential in my own construction of a synchronic exploration of the unstageable. This thesis’ shifting narrative, as well as my continuing emphasis on a historical examination of moments of unstageability, owes much to Benjamin’s assertion in the third of the theses that ‘nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history’.⁴⁸

Michael Löwy, in his book-length study of ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, notes the potential inherent in this open approach. Löwy states that Benjamin’s

opening-up of the past...may reopen ‘closed’ historical cases, may ‘rehabilitate’ misrepresented victims, revive defeated hopes and aspirations, rediscover forgotten battles or battles regarded as ‘utopian’, ‘anachronistic’ or ‘running against the grain of future progress’.⁴⁹

While it may be an exaggeration to compare moments of unstageability amidst a theatre history that mostly records staging, to the kinds of historical misrepresentation and defeat that Benjamin (and Löwy) suggests, there is still some equivalence to be found. If there is an unstageable, it has been, to an extent, forgotten and misrepresented, obscured by the history of theatre’s advancements over time, and the lineage of what has been staged. With this in mind, therefore, I venture that my illustration of moments of unstageability, and the range of case studies I employ to serve this purpose, has been influenced by such a reading of Benjamin. The role of ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ in helping me to construct a theoretical framework with which to approach my

⁴⁸ Benjamin, p. 246.

⁴⁹ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*, trans. by C. Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 115.

thesis material lies in its articulation of history. Additionally, the ‘moment of danger’ to which I referred above, and which Benjamin describes in terms of a discussion of the past, is also relevant to my selection of examples, and aligns somewhat with Saussure’s approach to language. For Benjamin, this moment of danger seems to be a moment at which the genuine image of the past is recognised, disrupting the traditional (diachronic) view of history as a series of evolving events. Löwy, in his analysis of this passage, acknowledges the necessary action that must be taken in order to take advantage of the moment of danger. For Löwy, when this ‘authentic image of the past emerges...the historian – or revolutionary – has to show presence of mind...to grasp this unique moment’.⁵⁰

Another aspect of Benjamin’s work in relation to my thesis topic stems from some of his work on language. Samuel Weber, in *Benjamin’s –abilities*, focuses on Benjamin’s use of the suffix ‘-ability’ (and ‘i-bility’). For me, the best-known iterations of this are Benjamin’s discussion of reproducibility in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (or ‘The Work on Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’), and his work on translatability in ‘The Task of the Translator’. In the former essay, Benjamin describes the reproduction of a work of art in terms of the loss of its ‘aura’, or its authentic originality, relating the accelerating reproducibility of art in the twentieth century to Marxist modes of capitalist production. In the latter piece, Benjamin, discussing the work of translation, sees translatability as a quality held by some pieces of writing and not by others. He suggests that certain work would ‘lend itself to translation’, a translatability which for Benjamin relates to a calibre of language.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Löwy., p. 44.

⁵¹ Benjamin, p. 71.

As well as these two examples of ‘-abilities’, Weber examines Benjamin’s writings on impartibility, criticizability, and citability, among others, and there are two aspects of this (Weber’s) work that dovetail with my own at certain points. Firstly, in his introduction, Weber describes Benjamin’s use of the suffix, or as he sees it, ‘forming nouns from verbs’, in relation to time. According to Weber, this work creates what is known in German as a *Zeitwort*, or ‘time-word’, a word that is then inextricably linked to time ‘insofar as it involves an ongoing, ever-unfinished, and unpredictable process’.⁵² In a similar way, and as will play out in variations across the scope of this thesis’ case studies, my research and writing on the unstageable has come to have an inseparable relationship with time. Indeed, my subtitle, ‘a synchronic exploration’, invoking the vocabulary of Saussurean linguistics, as outlined above, indicates this time-bound and language-based dimension to the work. Additionally, my transhistorical selection of case study examples presents a similar evocation of the significance of time in this thesis.

What’s in a name?

Having discussed a specific trajectory of language from the Longinian sublime through to Lyotardian and Rancièrian conceptions of unrepresentability, it is necessary to continue to discuss the particular term with which this thesis is engaged, before turning to some of the key theoretical material that has informed and underpinned my research. The possibilities of the unstageable in relation to particular examples will be explored in case study chapters, and the notion of the emergence of such possibilities will be discussed in specific contextual terms. However, it is difficult to think of such work as providing any kind of ‘formula’ of unstageability, though a list of shared characteristics may emerge. As I will be considering unstageability in three different theatrical-

⁵² Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 7.

historical contexts, it seems possible that the question of the unstageable could be quite distinct in each case. With this in mind, it seems that an interrogation of the word could support the range of contexts that will follow in the chapters to come.

For example, a year after the director Robert Shaw staged a production of Sylvia Plath's only radio drama, *Three Women*, Alexis Soloski wrote an article for the *Guardian* newspaper in September 2010 entitled 'What makes a play unstageable?'. At the end of my second year of research and writing about 'the unstageable', this question, put by Soloski, concisely articulated my desire to attempt to re-evaluate and even rehabilitate the word and its usage. At conferences and study days, I had been quizzed on what this word 'unstageable' (that seemed to be clearly related to theatre) might mean and why it was so difficult to pin down and examine in detail. Usually, the questioner would describe the experience of watching something at the theatre that they had found difficult or impossible to watch or to continue watching. This experience of seeing the representation on stage (always the representation) of blood / vomit / incest / force-feeding, to take a few examples, was usually associated, for my interlocutor, with the word 'unstageable', and they would follow their description with the inevitable question, 'Is that what you mean by unstageable?' For me, the seemingly automatic interrelation between the word 'unstageable' and something that had been staged, and the frequency with which this association was (and continues to be) made, led to my becoming curious about it. Similarly, as will be related in Chapter One, the almost-routine mention of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* as soon as the word 'unstageable' was mentioned by me caused a cessation of my immediate response that if the questioner had seen the play produced then there was a significant extent to which it was categorically stageable, and in fact led, in conjunction with other factors to which I will return in

Chapter One, to the research and writing of a chapter dedicated to the discovery of a certain sort of unstageability in *Peer Gynt*.

Of course, my awareness of this word operating as a turn of phrase is acute. It is true that ‘unstageable’ is often used in a hyperbolic sense, much in the same way that the word ‘literally’ has come to be frequently (mis)used. For example, in popular music, it is not uncommon to hear of up-and-coming bands or solo artists described as ‘literally exploding onto the music scene’.⁵³ This example of word usage is perhaps a facile one, but my intention is to acknowledge the collapsible nature of hyperbolic words in linguistic terms, and equally to note that I am attempting to make a deeper enquiry into notions of unstageability than one purely based on language. With this in mind, the observations of encounters above trace my own process of constructing a more useful working definition for this word than that which is frequently used in conversation (and in reviews of performance, as will be shown) to describe something on the stage that is difficult to watch. This sense of unwatchability is relevant to and useful for my work on the unstageable, and it has been comprehensively and authoritatively discussed, particularly in relation to the watching of trauma or violence on stage, by Josette Féral, Helen Freshwater, and Bonnie Marranca, among others.⁵⁴ This particular angle from which to explore unwatchability becomes more pertinent to my thesis when the Parisian Théâtre du Grand-Guignol is discussed as a case study later on.

Returning to the idea of the word’s function as a label, in his 2009 monograph, James Frieze discusses theatre’s ‘obsession with naming in recent theatrical performances and

⁵³ Stephen Appleby, *Literally...Laugh Your Head Off* (London: Prion, 2007), p. 4.

⁵⁴ Josette Féral, ‘From Event to Extreme Reality: The Aesthetic of Shock’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 55:4 (2011), 51-63; Helen Freshwater, ‘Sex, Violence and Censorship: London’s Grand Guignol and the negotiation of the limit’, *Theatre Research International*, 32:3 (2002), 247-262; Marranca, 2006.

texts'.⁵⁵ He acknowledges past emphases on the analysis of the relationship between a thing (character, place, object) and its name, but warns that '[n]ames can stand in the way of, and render invisible, repositories of memory...aiding memory; but they also forget'.⁵⁶ He asserts that the bringing to the surface of a name in relation to a thing, while establishing a certain mode of understanding, disables every other option for visibility or comprehension. In his words, 'naming is also un-naming'.⁵⁷ Underlying Frieze's exploration of his theme is a sense of the fragmentation of naming inherent in performance practices, especially when such practices succeed in freeing themselves from particular language-based naming structures, and move away from the conventional idea that naming allows us to watch (or to read) performance in certain ways. For me, there are some implications here for my understanding of ideas of unstageability, particularly regarding Ibsen and *Peer Gynt*, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter One. If, as Frieze suggests, '[o]ther possible entities are overwritten or unwritten' in the decision to name something as such, this is quite significant to the decades of labelling or naming to which *Peer Gynt* has been subjected.⁵⁸ Frequently referred to as 'unstageable', even in reviews of performances, themselves utterly stageable almost by definition, the play responds well to many of Frieze's examples of 'improper naming'. With this in mind, my work on *Peer Gynt* as the first case study in this thesis is not an attempt at a solution to this impropriety (in the sense that Frieze uses this word), but rather stands as a problematising of its naming as unstageable, and an acknowledgement of the overwriting and/or unwriting of its other possible existences.

⁵⁵ James Frieze, *Naming Theatre: Demonstrative Diagnosis in Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 1

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

My interest in Frieze's work also relates to the manner in which he examines the concept of naming, using a wide variety of theatrical and performative examples in order to illustrate his thoughts, while creating a constant and definite agenda in his exploration of these examples. As mentioned above, my research has been both content-based and methodological. Much of the material I have consulted during the research for this thesis has been, of course, thematically related to the discussion I am pursuing. However, it has also been interesting to me to examine the various approaches taken by other writers in their work on specific words or concepts, and to learn from these approaches how best to organise my own reading, thought, and writing, when the central concept is both broad and ephemeral. The usefulness of reading and reflecting on current and previous writing about concepts embodied in singular words has been significant. An awareness of other writers' methods of and approaches to dealing with specific terms, and their genealogy, history, and application, has seemed to me to be necessary to the formulation of my own work on a word. Despite the fact that it remains difficult to find writing that looks at the word 'unstageable' in anything other than a cursory manner, as will be explored throughout the thesis, the work done by other scholars on other words has provided an array of models to consider.

For example, Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* takes as its starting point the search for 'a theory of value for that which is not "really" there, that which cannot be surveyed within the boundaries of the putative real'.⁵⁹ Phelan's examination of the significance of the invisible employs psychoanalytic and feminist theories of representation in an articulation of the connection between representational visibility and political power. For Phelan, the emphasis on what is visible in art maintains the real in a conspiratorial manner that does not allot any power to the invisible. However, representation's

⁵⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 1

constant failure to precisely reproduce the real creates an porous terrain upon which the invisible can gain importance, and it is to this terrain that Phelan leads the reader in her monograph. This work's implications for my understanding of the unstageable lie with the sense of 'making visible' that is the bedrock of Phelan's study of performance, as she explores a range of performance examples in terms of the paradoxes of visibility they contain. My discussion of unstageability can be related to the political sense with which Phelan refers to visibility. For her, the political right (particularly, the New Right – at time of writing – in the United States) is concerned with 'ideological assurance' and a sense of visible (false) unity made manifest in condemnations and criticisms; and the political left attempts to make the under-represented members of society visible.⁶⁰ In allowing this aspect of Phelan's central thesis to inform my own work, I am acknowledging both the invisibility of the unstageable, shrouded by theatre's emphasis on what it can stage, and my own position as I attempt to make it visible in the light of the examples I will discuss.

Additionally, Sara Jane Bailes' recent work on the concept of failure in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* further contributes to my methodological understanding of the investigation and definition of a resistant term. While Phelan discusses visibility from the point of the invisible, Bailes looks at failure's power to simultaneously fragment agreed ways of doing things, and explore new ones, allowing practitioners to investigate the conventional theatre's limits. While I do not directly examine failure in the way that Bailes does, such a notion of the subversive potential of failure is particularly interesting in terms of the possibilities of the unstageable. For me, these possibilities explore the theatre's limits in a subtler way than companies specifically exploring notions of failure (Bailes refers to Forced Entertainment, Goat

⁶⁰ Phelan, p. 28.

Island and Elevator Repair Service specifically), referencing what theatre can stage (and/or has been able to stage) and emerging in relation to such conventions.

Other unstageabilities

Resistance

Another method of exploring unstageability has to do with the relationship between a dramatic text and its theatrical production, or perhaps, between the writer of the text and the director who decides to stage it. For example, Heiner Müller, in a 1975 interview with Horst Laube (then dramaturg of the Frankfurt Schauspiel), mentioned that ‘literature has the task of offering resistance to the theatre’. ⁶¹Müller’s comment succinctly captures an aspect of the interrelation between text and theatre that approaches a discussion of stageability, particularly in relation to twentieth and twenty-first century theatre texts that do not subscribe to a conventional sense of modern drama or the ‘well-made play’, such as Müller’s own work. Indeed, he mentions that ‘[t]here are enough plays which serve the theatre the way the theatre is’ and so it seems clear that what is at stake for Müller in terms of stageability is the idea of a challenge from one medium to another, from the dramatic text to its realisation on the stage. ⁶² Furthermore, in noting that ‘[o]nly when a text cannot be done the way the theatre is conditioned to do it, is the text productive for the theatre, or of any interest’, it seems that Müller is particularly interested in the use of text as a tool or device, spurring theatre into a state of reawakening, and encouraging it to rethink its own representational boundaries. ⁶³

⁶¹ Carl Weber, ed. *The Battle: plays, prose, poems by Heiner Müller* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1989), p. 160.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

An illustrative example of this relationship can be found in a brief examination of an interview with the British playwright Sarah Kane, concerning her 1998 play *Cleansed*. When asked about her motivation for writing such a seemingly unstageable play, Kane replied that she wanted to create

a play that could never ever be turned into a film – it could never ever be shot for television; it could never be turned into a novel. The only thing that could ever be done with it was it could be staged, and believe it or not that play is *Cleansed*. You may say it can't be staged, but it can't be anything else either.⁶⁴

The idea of one artform resisting and challenging another, in Müller's case a literature that compels theatre to re-invent its forms, to re-consider the functions of representation every time it produces a dramatic work, engenders an interesting way of thinking about unstageability. For me, Kane's assertion encapsulates Müller's notion of resistance, as outlined above. This way of thinking about unstageability, as a challenge from literature to theatre, seems to suggest an engagement between the writer and director (or writer and production team) that invokes a sense of 'doing' unstageability, or a practice of the unstageable.

Censorship

The censorship of artistic work is a practice that results in a very literal sense of unstageability, for the censored material. This idea of the censoriously unstageable relates particularly to the final case study in this thesis, the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio. A Paris performance of one of the Italian company's most recent works, *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, was interrupted in October 2011 by protestors. Representatives from Institut Civitas, a Christian fundamentalist organisation, took to the stage with placards stating, among other things, 'Stop

⁶⁴ Graham Saunders, *Love me or kill me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 87.

Christianophobia'. The following night, audience members waiting to enter the theatre for the performance were assaulted with eggs and oil by the same organisation, which also attempted to close the production's run at the Théâtre de la Ville via a court ban, which was unsuccessful. I will return to questions of censorship in the conclusion to this thesis as perhaps constitutive of an ongoing enquiry into ways of thinking about unstageability. More generally though, this thesis will not present an in-depth study of the practice of theatre censorship. Writers such as Helen Freshwater, Steve Nicholson, Nicholas de Jongh, and Richard Findlater have presented comprehensive and thought-provoking explorations 'of the various outcomes of censorious interventions ...[offering] an opportunity to consider what generates the desire to silence and suppress performance', particularly in the context of the history of British theatre.⁶⁵ My own work, instead, acknowledges the censoriously unstageable but focuses increasingly on moments of unstageability that have not been imposed by official censorship practices, but by less obvious forces.

Medical unstageable

Interestingly, definitions of the unstageable also exist away from the theatrical world, in the area of medical practice. In medicine, 'unstageable' is used within the system of classification, or staging, of a wound, ulcer, or cancer. The four 'stages' in this system refer to increased levels of damage to the body, and the word 'unstageable' is applied if it is impossible for the healthcare professional to classify, or stage, the wound. For example, in wound care, an unstageable ulcer is one that contains necrotic skin tissue,

⁶⁵ Helen Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 159. See also Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama: 1900-1968* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2005).

Nicholas de Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage, 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2002).

Richard Findlater, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* (London: Mac Gibbon & Kee, 1967).

the occurrence of which is based on the progress of cell death over time. This necrosis obscures the wound, and so it is impossible to stage it.⁶⁶ In terms of my project, it is worth mentioning that since 2007 the staging of ulcers, and particularly the definition of the unstageable ulcer, has been revised, redefined, and re-presented in terms of new criteria. For example, in the United States, the National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel aims to ‘make the definition of unstageable ulcers distinguishable from DTI [deep tissue injury] and to be clear on what constitutes an unstageable ulcer’.⁶⁷ These new criteria and points of clarity are mostly to do with gradually removing the necrotic tissue, or eschar, from the ulcer, eventually allowing it to be staged in terms of the four stages in the classification system. In short, the healthcare professionals engaging in this system are staging what was previously unstageable.

I am wary of continuing this link between the medical unstageable and the theatrical unstageable, for fear of venturing too far into a metaphor that becomes redundant in the face of the differences between the medical work done to stage the previously unstageable, and this thesis’ concerns with the historical specificity of the word in theatre, and the questioning of its existence. Unstageability in medicine is dangerous to flesh and to life, and unstageability in theatre usually presents a far safer terrain in this regard. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, in medical contexts, a specific point has been identified at which unstageability exists. Additionally, the recent move in wound care away from classifying ulcers as unstageable, and towards working on unstageable ulcers to the extent that they become stageable, has some resonance with some of the ideas explored in this thesis, particularly in relation to the first case study,

⁶⁶ Cf. Sharon Baronoski and Elizabeth Ayello, *Wound Care Essentials: Practice Principles* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2007).

⁶⁷ National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel *Inside the NPUAP*, 20 (2006), 1, http://www.npuap.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/11NEWS_06_Fall.pdf [accessed 18 February 2011].

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. The first production of this play in 1876, and the theatrical recovering of what was previously considered to be unstageable, can relate to the work of staging, that is classifying, the medically unstageable.

An 'unstageable' unstageable?

In reading and thinking about unstageability, and using the word 'unstageable' as a way of describing and evaluating various aspects of theatre and performance, the issue of placing quotation marks around the word arises. Researching articles and reviews describing productions as unstageable, it has become clear that many of these references surround the word with quotation marks, but the reason for this is not always clear. For example, the first case study that I will explore, Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, has generated a range of writing which refers to the play in these terms. An example comes from Patricia Merivale's article in *Comparative Literature* which, as part of a comparison between *Faust* and *Peer Gynt*, describes the use of music in the first production of the latter as a requirement 'for the staging of the "unstageable" *Peer Gynt*'.⁶⁸ To take another example, moving briefly away from the thesis' case studies, Stuart Young wrote an article for *Modern Drama* in 2009 that explored three UK-based adaptations of Anton Chekhov's first play, known in English as *Platonov*. The article is entitled 'Making the "unstageable" stageable'. These applications of quotation marks to the word do not appear to be sarcastic or ironic, as can sometimes be the case. Indeed, the style of Merivale's use of the punctuation approaches that of quoting in academic writing, though without a reference or source in this case. In Young's case, his use of quotation marks almost seems to present a refutation of previous labellings of *Platonov* as unstageable, given that his article discusses its staging on three separate occasions, albeit in adapted form. Nevertheless, he does not unpick the previously-considered

⁶⁸ Patricia Merivale, 'Ibsen's *Faustiad*', *Comparative Literature*, 35:2 (1983), 126-139, 128.

unstageability of the play, and so the word ceases to be used by him after a single reference at the beginning of the article.⁶⁹

In writing up my research, the temptation to use quotation marks in order to add emphasis or to disagree with another writer's use of the word, has become a necessary point to consider. Sometimes, it seems appropriate to use quotation marks around the word 'unstageable' in order to differentiate between the various definitions that have been attributed to it. Equally, at other times, the use of quotation marks has not seemed necessary to me, particularly as I have begun to strengthen my own thoughts about what the word can mean and how it can be applied within the scope of my thesis. This mixed use of quotation marks, initially driven by nothing other than my innate sense of what 'worked' and did not in the course of the writing, required further attention. I turned to a number of internationally recognised style guides for advice, and found their directions, while sometimes contradictory, to be helpful to my reasoning.

As well as devoting lengthy sections to the practice of quoting in academic writing more generally, most style handbooks also describe their advised use of quotation marks as punctuation. For example, the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA), whose style guide is advocated for undergraduates in King's College London's English Department, indicates that quotation marks are appropriate for 'definitions of words, or for otherwise highlighting a word or phrase'.⁷⁰ Similarly, *The Oxford Style Manual* advises the writer to '[u]se quotation marks to enclose an unfamiliar word or phrase, or one to be used in a technical sense'.⁷¹ The style guide

⁶⁹ Stuart Young, 'Making the "unstageable" stageable', *Modern Drama*, 52:3 (2009), 325-350, 325.

⁷⁰ *MHRA Style Guide*, 3rd edn. (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2013), p. 50.

⁷¹ R.M. Ritter, ed. *The Oxford Style Manual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 149.

published by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), and the preferred handbook for many UK universities, advises the use of quotation marks ‘around a word or phrase given in a special sense or purposefully misused’.⁷² Finally, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, popular in American universities, asserts that ‘[q]uotation marks are often used to alert readers that a term is used in a nonstandard...or other special sense’.⁷³

These definitions of advised use have allowed me to draw some conclusions about my own usage of quotation marks. However, each style guide also cautions against overuse or misuse of quotation marks, and this must be taken into consideration. MHRA recommends the writer to ‘[a]void the practice of using quotation marks as an oblique excuse for a loose, slang, or imprecise (and possibly inaccurate) word or phrase’.⁷⁴ Turning to *The Oxford Style Manual*, there is a stronger admonition about the use of ‘quotation marks around colloquial or slang words or phrases’, urging us that ‘[t]his device, called “scare quotes”, functions simply as a replacement for a sniffy “so-called”, and should be used as rarely’.⁷⁵ The MLA warns that ‘[i]f introduced unnecessarily, this device can make writing heavy-handed’.⁷⁶ Finally, *The Chicago Manual of Style* provides perhaps the most active deterrent, advising that ‘scare quotes lose their force and irritate readers if overused...Chicago discourages that practice unless it is essential to the author’s argument and not confusing to readers’.⁷⁷

⁷² Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th edn. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003), p. 91.

⁷³ *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edn. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 366.

⁷⁴ *MHRA*, p. 51.

⁷⁵ Ritter, p. 149.

⁷⁶ Gibaldi, p. 92.

⁷⁷ *Chicago*, p. 366.

With this information in mind, I have begun to think further about how and when I should use quotation marks within this work. I am attempting to define and highlight ‘unstageable’, therefore complying with the MHRA’s guide. I am discussing a (somewhat) unfamiliar word, and apply it in a technical sense, so Oxford University Press would allow the use. I note a particularly interesting relationship with the MLA’s instructions. Using the word in a special sense is similar to the other handbooks’ requirements, but the idea that quotation marks are also appropriate to delineate the purposeful misuse of a word is not mentioned by the other guides, and this is certainly an aspect of my research that I will articulate throughout the thesis. However, it has also been necessary to examine my use of quotation marks in the light of the more negative aspects of the style guides’ pronouncements. For example, I do not wish to utilise quotation marks as a device, as an ‘oblique excuse’ to gloss over the difficult work of re-examining a term. As mentioned above, I am certainly not substituting quotation marks for the expression ‘so-called’, sniffy or otherwise. It is not my intention to ‘employ the finger-wagging gesture’, as Marjorie Garber playfully describes the use of quotation marks made with the hands, as if the user is indicating the inadequacy of the word alone unless accompanied by this hand gesture.⁷⁸ In Garber’s *Quotation Marks*, which examines a range of words and phrases that have been, or seem to be uttered in quotation marks, from the last two lines of Keats’ poem ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ to the word ‘fashionable’, she additionally notes ‘the paradox that quotation marks can be signs of both authenticity and suspicion: the real thing and the “pseudo”’.⁷⁹ This presents an interesting relation to my work on the unstageable, and my questions about the use of quotation marks.

⁷⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Quotation Marks* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 11.

⁷⁹ Garber, p. 27.

Combining *The Chicago Manual of Style*'s warning that quotation marks could lose their initial impact over time, with Garber's comment about the paradoxical nature of their use, I suggest a particular use of quotation marks in this thesis. Syntactically, using quotation marks around the word 'unstageable' marks it as significant within a sentence. With this in mind, I will use quotation marks when discussing definitions of the word. However, in deference to the challenging nature of the word, and the inherent questions of 'authenticity and suspicion' that surround it without any additional attention from punctuation, I will use the word without quotation marks when discussing unstageability in specific contextual settings. I will endeavour to ensure that this is not confusing to my readers, and will remember that, as Garber suggests:

The fact that audiences, readers, and speakers change over time means that the authors, figures, terms, and concepts they discuss, though they bear the same names, also change. Language and culture are always in quotation marks for us. (It would be tedious and supererogatory to write this sentence as it might be inflected under the sign of quotation marks as I describe them in this volume: "Language" and "culture" are "always" in quotation marks for "us").⁸⁰

The theatre as example

Simon Bayly, in the introduction to *A Pathognomy of Performance*, states that his book 'departs from theatre...but it does not return there'.⁸¹ This monograph, published in 2011, takes the little-used word pathognomy, the study of 'what is fleeting or ephemeral' and applies it to performance in not just its everyday and extraordinary capacities, but at a number of points in between.⁸² From Darwin's photographs of expressions to Philippe Petit's wire-walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Center, from laughter to sneezing to astrophysics, Bayly, who describes pathognomy's 'tactics of operation [as] those of the hunt; its mode of looking is the glance or glimpse', does much more than glance or glimpse at the range of philosophers he invokes to

⁸⁰ Garber, p. 4.

⁸¹ Simon Bayly, *A Pathognomy of Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 3.

⁸² Ibid., p. 1.

support his ideas surrounding moments of the failure or the crumbling of the act, and their implications for performer and spectator alike.⁸³

In doing this work, he also ‘departs from theatre’, as mentioned above, and tells us why. An endnote towards the start of his second chapter briefly touches upon Nicholas Ridout’s 2006 *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, a book he refers to as ‘perhaps a kind of “companion” text to this one’.⁸⁴ In this note, Bayly states that ‘Ridout’s concerns are very much with the stage and various breakdowns and suspensions of its mimetic machinery, sustained by the kind of focus and commitment to the theatre that I have found entirely impossible’.⁸⁵ A concern with the stage, and a focus and commitment to the theatre, is also where I situate my enquiry into the historical unstageable, though in a different manner to Ridout’s exploration of a range of uncomfortable encounters between the bodies performing on the stage, and the bodies watching them perform. Rather than an exploration of the breakdown of the theatrical machine, as Ridout articulates, I am increasingly concerned with what the contextual possibilities of the unstageable might be in the midst of the (seemingly, or previously) functioning theatre.

Additionally, the work done in separating the idea of what is or is not or might be *unstageable* from what is or is not or might be *unrepresentable* has led me to discuss the unstageable as a theatrically-specific condition of unrepresentability. Indeed, in the first two chapters I will be referring particularly to the representational performance of dramatic literature, and its adherence to certain notions of realism, which in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has become an additional subset of theatre and

⁸³ Bayly, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 206, n. 8.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

performance. Baz Kershaw, in *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, recounts Richard Schechner's assertion that 'theatre as we have known and practiced it – the staging of written dramas – will be the string quartet of the twenty-first century: a beloved but extremely limited genre, a subdivision of performance'.⁸⁶ It is difficult to deny that the limitations of the theatre are in many ways apparent, and indeed are potentially divisible into units, as Geoffrey Bennington's triumvirate of theatrical limitations suggests. Discussing Jean-François Lyotard's use of the theatre as a model for the analysis of representation, Bennington ventures that the external walls of the theatre building provide the first limitation; that the separation between stage and audience in the auditorium can be seen as the second; and that the division between the stage space and any backstage or wings areas form the third limitation of the theatre. Lyotard, in *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, has aligned each of these limits with an aspect of theatre, showing 'the fact' to be outside the theatre; 'the narrative' to take place on stage; and 'the director, the narrator' to be concealed in the backstage space.⁸⁷ While this is a specifically spatial method of approaching the theatre's physical limits, it certainly suggests a way of thinking about the theatrical stage, and what may or may not be possible there.

As the use of words such as 'may' and 'might', 'potential' and 'possible' mounts, the decision to spend time and thought and work on such an ephemeral and collapsible idea, with elusive characteristics, an impenetrable historical timeline and a dubious existence, must be questioned. The answer remains that notions of the unstageable persist, not as substantive or visible material, but as a series of passionate ideas. The unstageable suggests what lies beyond the limits of stageability, beyond what the theatre can do

⁸⁶ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 14.

⁸⁷ Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 10.

right now, depending on which ‘right now’ is under discussion at any given time. It suggests an investment in that space beyond stageability, even when all evidence for its existence necessarily points to the contrary. Indeed, most of this thesis concerns itself with that which has been shown to be staged, despite its labelling as ‘unstageable’. Each of my examples is stubbornly stageable and has been staged. With this in mind, it seems that this work moves toward a theory of stageability even as it hovers around a notion of unstageability. The phrase ‘staging the unstageable’ will play out across this work as a reminder of the unstageable’s episodic narrative alongside theatre history, and a call to thought concerning alternative ways of considering the unstageable at various moments in time.

In terms of where this work might situate itself more widely in the field of theatre and performance studies, the image of a tangent is an interesting one to use. While the word tangent has perhaps become overused, and the phrase ‘going off on a tangent’ has acquired a negative connotation in terms of speaking and writing, a reclamation occurs when the original definition of the word is invoked. In mathematics, a tangent is a straight line that touches a circle at a specific point, but never crosses it. In the same way, I see this work on moments of historical unstageability in theatre as tangential to some current writing on ideas surrounding failure in theatre and performance studies. I use ‘failure’ hesitatingly as an umbrella term, because the writers and thinkers that I draw together underneath it are diverse in their subject matters, methodologies, styles and approaches. However, using failure in its many and broadest senses, it seems that the umbrella may stretch to accommodate most.

Ridout initially discusses theatre’s failure in terms of our contemporary unease at ‘its status as a bourgeois pastime’, as well as the inevitable breaking down of the ‘huge

machine’ upon which theatrical production depends.⁸⁸ Sara Jane Bailes, in the more recently published *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, concerns herself with the failure of representation and theatre’s susceptibility ‘to all kinds of failure, especially when it is live’, examining the work of performance companies such as Forced Entertainment and Goat Island, who, in much of their work, harness the aporetic notion of failure in performance, whether highlighting the failure of the performer’s body to do something (Goat Island’s *The Lastmaker*) or explaining what we could be watching if conditions were different to the way they are ‘tonight’ (Forced Entertainment’s *Spectacular*).⁸⁹ Interestingly, though Bailes’ monograph and a special issue of *Performance Research*, both of which pay titular attention to failure, appeared in 2011 and 2012, the origins of such ideas of failure appear elsewhere and earlier. For example, in Alan Read’s *Theatre & Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*, as Ridout notes, Read makes a distinction between ineptitude on the part of the performer, and any momentary (or otherwise) ‘collapse’ of the theatrical world on the stage.⁹⁰ This sort of failure, for Read, tends to work on the audience in a captivatingly productive way, leading to ‘an *increased* level of attention and participation’, rather than the inattention that might be expected.⁹¹ These origins can also be traced to Simon Bayly’s PhD dissertation, written in 2002, cited in Ridout in 2006, and published as a monograph in 2011. Here, Bayly devotes much of *The Pathognomy of Performance* to an examination of ‘the minor slips...that affect the undertaking of any complex enterprise’, in this case performance.⁹² I will return to these writers, and to others, though noting that my work lies slightly beyond and to the side of the realm they individually and sometimes

⁸⁸ Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 4; p. 31.

⁸⁹ Bailes, p. xv.

⁹⁰ Alan Read, *Theatre & Everyday Life: an ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 54.

⁹¹ Read, p. 54.

⁹² Bayly, p. 35.

collectively inhabit. I continue to think about the unstageable in theatre not in terms of what fails to happen, fails in the happening or happens to excess, but what has not happened *yet*, at a particular moment in time. With this in mind, instead of ‘departing’ from theatre, as Bayly would have us do, or joining with Ridout in describing the theatre as knowingly ‘guilty’, in this work I try not to blame the theatre, or to depart from the theatre, but instead to observe it from the inside, waiting for something that does not arrive (yet), rather than performing or dissecting the many ways in which what has arrived already is, from many perspectives, doomed to fail.⁹³

(Anti-) Theatrical struggles

Following on from the discussion above, it must also be noted that the theatre, to which this thesis refers in terms of its choice of case study examples and its historical lineage, has long been the site of conflict and suspicion. Indeed, Jonas Barish’s monograph, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, presents an extensive selection of examples of such attitudes to the theatre, ranging from Plato to the mid-twentieth century, a project whose call is taken up authoritatively by Martin Puchner in *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*, and in an edited collection by Puchner and Alan Ackerman, *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*. In the latter, Ackerman and Puchner reframe Barish’s history of charges levelled against the theatre, focusing on modernist and post-modernist makers of theatre. What emerges is an exploration of the potential of the anti-theatrical destruction inherent in a range of examples from twentieth-century opera’s response to Richard Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to Stéphane Mallarmé and Maurice Maeterlinck’s rejection of French theatre’s materiality. Marrying this wide-ranging exploration of specific theatrical work with a noting of the historicisation of anti-theatricalism, and its function as a response to a particular theatre,

⁹³ Ridout, p. 4.

has resonated with my own work in an interesting way. I aim to illustrate the theoretical discussions laid out in this introduction with three specific, transhistorical case study examples. In this, I do not intend to explain unstageability generally, but, as Barish writes of his own study of antitheatricalism, I will attempt ‘to explore the territory within which it operates’.⁹⁴

Returning to Puchner’s *Stage Fright*, I have noted his assertion that

the negation and rejection inherent in the term anti-theatricalism is...not to be understood as a doing away with the theatre, but as a process that is dependent on that which it negates and to which it therefore remains calibrated.⁹⁵

It could, perhaps, be conjectured that a doctoral thesis discussing unstageability harbours a certain impulse to ‘do away with’ the theatre, as Puchner describes above in relation to assumptions that could be made about anti-theatricality. However, like Puchner (and like Barish), I understand the reliance of unstageability on that which has been staged, on staging. Furthermore, I will be thinking of unstageability throughout this thesis not as a binary opposition to the staged or the stageable, but as a way of thinking about a number of moments in theatre, hopefully encountering some points of contact between them by the thesis’ conclusion. In this, I am supported by a model borrowed from Robert Harbison’s *The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable: in pursuit of architectural meaning*. In this work, Harbison refers to the unbuildable in architecture as ‘various ways of struggling against physical unlikelihood’.⁹⁶ He differentiates between the unbuilt building and the unbuildable building without ultimately opposing them, though admitting that efforts toward the latter are ‘more

⁹⁴ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (California and London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 3.

⁹⁵ Puchner, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Robert Harbison, *The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable: in pursuit of architectural meaning* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 11.

interesting and a truer illustration of this idea [of physical unlikelihood] than simple non-existence'.⁹⁷

To take this notion and return with it to the theatre, a suggestion of the staged and the unstageable as dichotomous is unhelpful here, though some of the writing on closet drama, which has strong links to ideas of unstageability and to which I will return in my exploration of *Peer Gynt*, takes this position. For example, Shou-ren Wang employs the terms 'unacted drama' and 'drama as such' in his discussion of nineteenth-century plays that were not presented on the stage.⁹⁸ In his reading of Lord Byron's closet dramas and Robert Browning's *Paracelsus*, among other texts, Wang constructs a theory that he calls 'the theatre of the mind'.⁹⁹ For Wang, the theatre of the mind is a mental space whereby the writer can realise their self-expression and impart it to the reader unfettered by the demands of theatrical logistics. As Wang continues, '[t]he theatre of the mind which is able to embrace the infinitude of time and space thus transcends the limitations of the theatre of brick and stone, and represents what is otherwise unrepresentable'.¹⁰⁰ While this way of thinking presents some interesting thoughts on the closet dramatist's inner life, Wang's impulse is towards literature rather than theatre, and so the theatre is, to an extent, 'done away with' here in favour of a readership who will engage with 'insubstantial voices originating from the mind of the author...the incorporeality of character', though these are characteristics which could certainly be attributed to some of the modernist and postmodernist writers to which Puchner refers in *Stage Fright*.¹⁰¹ Indeed, Puchner's discussion towards the end of the book, which notes '[t]he total disregard...for the requirements of the stage' of Gertrude Stein and Heiner Müller's

⁹⁷ Harbison, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Shou-ren Wang, *The Theatre of the Mind* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. ix.

⁹⁹ Wang, p. xxiii.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 203.

work, will return in my third case study's exploration of the work of Società Raffaello Sanzio.¹⁰²

An additional note on the kind of anti-theatricality to which Wang refers can be seen in the work of William Gruber, who questions the status of onstage narration in relation to that which occurs offstage or in the minds of the audience, focusing on the role of the imagination as central to the spectator's experience of theatre. Echoing to an extent Jacques Rancière's discussion of conditions of unrepresentability, though he does not reference this directly, Gruber argues that the limits of what can be represented in the theatre are few. With this in mind, for Gruber, 'the things that playwrights choose *not* to represent can be as significant as what meets the eye'.¹⁰³ This negative analysis of theatrical writing and representation is interesting, as is Gruber's suggestion of 'a poetics of omission' through which to theorise the various ways in which narration takes the place of 'direct mimetic enactment'.¹⁰⁴ However, in a similar manner to Wang, the specific emphasis on narration's function in dramatic writing is less significant to my discussion of unstageability, which suggests a more fleeting, less permanent condition of failure and/or impossibility.

Finally, Benjamin Bennett's articulation of the role of dramatic text as a type of literature in terms of 'the disruptive' and 'a problem', evoking vocabulary that might be associated with failure, is a primarily genre-based 'problem'.¹⁰⁵ Referring to theatre's position as simultaneously consisting of the text *and* its representation, his concern seems to be that 'without actually belonging to literature, [theatre] still manages

¹⁰² Puchner, p. 173.

¹⁰³ William Gruber, *Offstage Space, Narrative, and the Theatre of the Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Bennett, *Theater as Problem: Modern Drama and its Place in Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 5-6.

somehow to be crucial to literature'.¹⁰⁶ Accepting the inextricable relationship of the dramatic text to its theatrical realisation, Bennett's premise is that this non-textual aspect is in fact a particular (and, at times, subversive) strength of modern drama. However, it remains clear throughout that Bennett is specifically focusing on dramatic literature rather than theatrical production, suggesting a range of implications stemming from the concluding notion that modern drama is *intended* for realisation on the stage. This thinking allows me to situate my own work on unstageability, particularly my study of Ibsen, in an interesting way, as the chapter on *Peer Gynt* intends to articulate some of the ways in which a focus on the theatrical production rather than the text can illuminate the possibilities of the unstageable, particularly when the theatrical-historical context of the work (in this case, at the end of the nineteenth century) is considered.

Writers such as those outlined above have allowed me to position and define my work, sometimes in alignment with and sometimes in opposition to theirs. Some will re-appear in the case study chapters, where additional explorations of literature specific to each example will be presented. However, I will turn now to an examination of the word with which this thesis is particularly concerned. Its origins, etymology, and a brief history of its usage, will lead towards an aspect of the theoretical kernel of this work, and an essay with which much of its thinking is concerned, Rancière's 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' Additionally, my discovery of the use of the word 'unstageable' at the beginning of the twentieth century, much earlier than other sources suggest, strengthen my decision to reach back into recent theatre history in order to illustrate questions of its existence, though with my position near to the theoreticians of antitheatricalism and anti-theatricality, and alongside the philosophers of failure and the impossible, always in mind.

¹⁰⁶ Bennett, p. 4.

Etymology: putting the ‘stage’ in ‘unstageable’ in the early twentieth century

The word ‘stage’ can be a noun and a verb in English, and both usages are relevant to my purpose here. I begin with the noun, ‘a stage’, as the verb derives from there.

Looking at the meaning of this word in terms of the original sense of somewhere or something that is stood upon, a ‘standing-place’, leads to the Latin word *stare*, meaning ‘to stand’.¹⁰⁷ From *stare*, the Latin *staticum* was used to describe this ‘standing-place’, and eventually the word *stadium* replaced *staticum*, a word still used today to describe a large arena in which spectating of one form or another usually takes place, often sporting events or concerts. Etymological dictionaries agree that the word ‘stage’ developed much more significantly in French than in English. The Old French *estage*, (the modern version of which is *étage*, the word today for ‘stage’ in French) was considered to be the correct translation of *stadium*. The etymological connection between this Latin word and the English language word ‘stage’, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, began sometime before 1600, but at first referred to ‘a stage’ in terms of a ‘division of a journey or process’, before the idea of ‘to stage’ as a verb to do with theatre became apparent.¹⁰⁸ This occurred soon after, and ‘to put (a person) into a play; to satirize in drama; to represent (a character, an incident) on the stage’ is a definition that has lasted from the early seventeenth century to the present day.¹⁰⁹ From this verb, it is clear that the possibility or potentiality that something *could* be staged, i.e. that it is *stageable* becomes relevant.

Continuing with the etymological, the suffix ‘able’ allows the word ‘stage’, in both its noun and verb senses, to become an adjective, a word used to describe. This particular suffix, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* performs the task of ‘[f]orming

¹⁰⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com> [28 October 2008].

¹⁰⁸ C.T. Onions, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1966).

¹⁰⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

adjectives denoting the capacity for or capability of being subjected to or (in some compounds) performing the action denoted or implied by the first element of the compound' (OED). In other words, the suffix 'able', when joined with the word 'stage', forms the word 'stageable', indicating 'able to be staged' or an ability to be subjected to or perform the action of staging, to use the OED's partially theatrical definition. However, the potentiality suggested by the 'able' suffix becomes problematised by the addition of the prefix 'un', couching the word 'stage' between the negative and the possible.

To return to the word 'unstageable' and an initial historical exploration of its use in relation to theatre and performance, *The Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the first use of the word 'unstageable' occurs in 1975 in the 7 April edition of the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper. In this article, there is a reference to '[g]hastly statistics about the vast number of totally unstageable scripts that come pouring through the post on to the desks of successful theatre people'.¹¹⁰ It also cites an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, published on 13 February 1981, which mentions that a play 'is unstageable today'. However, it seems that the word can also be traced to an earlier source. In this source, the word is used in a similar sense to the two already mentioned, referring to elements of a dramatic work that might be (or seem) difficult or impossible to put upon the stage, to theatrically stage. Indeed, the source predates the dictionary's findings by some decades, deepening the lineage of the word and its use in theatre and performance. This is revelatory for my own work on the unstageable, as it allows for a more rigorous historical background to be suggested, and a more relevant context in which to situate the examples I have chosen.

¹¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

With the 1975 and 1981 examples of the use of the word ‘unstageable’ in mind, I have also found an earlier use of the word in a short article by Colbert Searles in the November 1907 edition of the journal *Modern Language Notes*. This article is entitled ‘The Stageability of Garnier’s Tragedies’, and examines the work of the French sixteenth-century playwright Robert Garnier. Garnier was a tragic poet, producing seven tragedies and one tragicomedy over the course of his career, while simultaneously working as a lawyer in various parts of France.¹¹¹ In this article, Searles, referring to himself in terms of ‘us moderns’ while discussing a Renaissance playwright, describes the seeming difficulties that could be attached to staging any of Garnier’s plays.¹¹² This quality of ‘seeming’ in terms of stageability will be returned to shortly, and has a certain impact on my thesis more generally, but initially, the significant factor here is Searles’ opinion on the stageability or otherwise of Garnier’s work. The article takes the form of a critique of Eugène Rigal and Gustave Lanson, contemporaries of Searles’, who both seemed to have previously suggested (in 1903 and 1904 respectively) in articles in the journal *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* that Garnier’s plays were unstageable, though Searles does not use this word immediately. Instead, he begins by using the term ‘dramatic probability’ to discuss Garnier’s work, which for me raises interesting questions regarding the ‘likelihood’ of staging a drama, how ‘probable’ it is that the drama will be staged, or perhaps not staged. Searles, in using the term ‘stageability’ here, displays awareness of its negative counterpart, ‘unstageability’. He refers to Lanson’s assertion that Garnier ‘seems to write for the reader only’ and Rigal’s that ‘these tragedies were not written for the stage at all’.¹¹³ These are assertions that are vehemently disagreed with by Searles throughout the article, and his methodical

¹¹¹ John Holyoake, *A Critical Study of the Tragedies of Robert Garnier (1545-90)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1987), p. 455.

¹¹² Colbert Searles, ‘The Stageability of Garnier’s Tragedies’, *Modern Language Notes*, 22:7 (1907), 225-229, 225.

¹¹³ Searles, p. 226.

rejection of what I would term ‘unstageability’ is interesting here for a number of reasons, especially in terms of allowing me to move towards my own critique of the word’s often hyperbolic utilisation in discussing theatre and performance.

Searles focuses on Rigal, discussing the latter’s work on Garnier in terms of ‘[finding] some difficulties that hardly exist to prove his point’.¹¹⁴ Rigal cites a breakdown in stageability in terms of the unities of time, place, and action, as set out by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. The unity of time refers to the idea that the action of a dramatic work should take place over no more than a single day. The unity of place deals with the notion that there should be only one physical space represented in the space in which the dramatic work is performed. Finally, the unity of action states that the dramatic should have one main plot that is followed without deviation. For example, Rigal implies unstageability due to a lack of unity of time when he discusses a scene in the play *Porcie* (1658), the first of Garnier’s plays to be published. In this scene, a messenger tells the title character, Porcie, of the death of her husband, Brute, and the plans to bring his body home to her. Following this, Porcie has a number of long speeches, which culminate in her addressing her husband’s dead body as if it is on the stage. Rigal mentions this in terms of a problem of stageability, as ‘nothing in the text indicates precisely how or when it got there’.¹¹⁵ However, this seems, both to Searles and to other Garnier scholars, somewhat literal-minded. Searles simply mentions that ‘this is no great difficulty’.¹¹⁶ John Holyoake, in his book *A Critical Study of the Tragedies of Robert Garnier (1545-90)* goes further, suggesting that altering Porcie’s language and directing it to the corpse was an intentional choice by Garnier, regardless

¹¹⁴ Searles, p. 226.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

of the corpse's presence or not upon the stage, 'so that the emotional climax in the language is heightened...a clear indication [of] the personal grief she feels'.¹¹⁷

Searles' use of the word 'unstageable' in this article occurs in his discussion of Garnier's third play, *Cornélie*, published in 1574. While Holyoake informs us that, in this play, 'the action is not so much simple as non-existent', this does not seem to be a direct criticism or otherwise of its stageability.¹¹⁸ Indeed, Searles explicitly mentions that *Cornélie* 'contains nothing absolutely unstageable', the word's first and only appearance in the article.¹¹⁹ He continues, noting a number of points in the play where, agreeing with Rigal, the rhetoric is such that the stageability of the play is potentially 'contestable'.¹²⁰ This example not only suggests the existence of the word in a much earlier context than that advocated by the OED, but suggests that a longer history of unstageability could be explored, though its inextricable links to specificities of time and space could certainly overwhelm such a surveyed historical undertaking. As mentioned above, Saussure's synchronic exploration of language is helpful here in uncovering discrete moments of unstageability and examining them in isolation. However, in order to do this, it is important to state what is meant by unstageability in the contexts within which I will use the word. I have already established a historical and philosophical sense of the word above, mapping the trajectory from the Longinian sublime through to the Lyotardian unrepresentable. Returning now to the work of Jacques Rancière in an attempt to further articulate a working definition of unstageable, I will undertake a close reading of some aspects of his essay 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' and suggest some of the ways in which this work influences my own in this area.

¹¹⁷ Holyoake, p. 59.

¹¹⁸ Holyoake, p. 188.

¹¹⁹ Searles, p. 227.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Jacques Rancière and further thoughts on a definition.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, Jacques Rancière stresses the idea of art as a 'regime' (*régime*), or more correctly, as divided into a number of regimes. He describes this notion of a regime of art as a way of thinking about connecting what is done when a work of art is created, with what it is that we see when we look at art, and consequently how these two things can be articulated, both individually and together. To further clarify this definition, it is perhaps helpful to turn to the 'three major regimes of identification' distinguished by Rancière in his discussion of art.¹²¹ These are the ethical regime of images (*le régime éthique des images*), the representative regime of art (*le régime représentatif de l'art*), and the aesthetic regime of art (*le régime esthétique de l'art*). The most relevant Rancièrian regimes for my discussion here are the latter two. The representative regime of art is, for Rancière, a way of looking at art separately from its ethical, practical, or educational functions (the latter being a primary concern of the ethical regime of images). Instead, this representative regime examines the terms of the arts' imitation of reality, while paying close attention to criteria such as

the hierarchy of genres and subject matter, the principle of appropriateness that adapts forms of expression and action to the subjects represented and to the proper genre, the ideal of speech as act that privileges language over the visible imagery that supplements it.¹²²

The norms thus established by the representative regime of art are, for Rancière, subsequently questioned in their entirety by the aesthetic regime of art, which instead claims to liberate art 'from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres'.¹²³ In terms of a more specific historical positioning of these regimes, Rancière's representative regime stems from Aristotle's critique of Plato's

¹²¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 20.

¹²² Ibid., p. 91.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 23.

views on art (and artists), and Aristotle's own subsequent discussion of the notion of mimesis. The aesthetic regime of art, on the other hand, can be found in the art of the past two centuries, or, as Rancière mentions, '[t]he aesthetic regime of the arts, it can be said, is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label "modernity"'.¹²⁴

The political, almost militaristic connotation of the word 'regime', as used by Rancière here, should not be viewed as coincidental. If a regime is defined as '[a] method or system of rule, governance, or control; a system of organization', a definition common to the word in both English and French, it can be suggested that Rancière intends the artistic regimes he discusses to be viewed in terms of a form of constraint upon art (OED). Even the eradication of rules and methods, as shown here with the aesthetic regime of art, occurs within a system, one that reflects, as Rancière puts it, 'the specificity of this regime of the arts and the very meaning of the specificity of regimes of art'.¹²⁵ This notion is further reinforced when Rancière's definition of representation in 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' is considered. Here, he describes representation as 'an ordered deployment of meanings, an adjusted relationship between what is understood or anticipated and what comes as a surprise'.¹²⁶ The image of meanings being 'deployed', a word that is often associated with military activity in terms of personnel or missiles, seems to further indicate that this 'adjusted relationship' is organised and limited, a form of representative control that links back to the established criteria for the representative regime of art, as outlined above.

The 'adjustment' of which Rancière speaks here in terms of representation leads him to a tripartite notion of 'representative constraint' involving adjustments of vision,

¹²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 24.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 112.

knowledge, and reality (Rancière, 2007, p. 113). These three adjustments contribute to a Rancièrian sense of what representation means, and also allow us to move towards an explanation of the ‘unrepresentable’ to which his essay title refers. The first of these adjustments relates to the relationship between what is seen and what is said. Speech, for Rancière, employs a dual method of substitution and exhibition. Firstly, words that are spoken allow something that is not present to be seen, via the medium of description. The words stand in for, or substitute, the absent thing-to-be-seen. Secondly, spoken words can articulate for us the kind of subtextuality that operates beneath the level of what we can or cannot physically see, that which is inherently concealed. The example given by Rancière refers to a character or an event’s motivation, the ‘inner springs’ of an incident or situation.¹²⁷ This reciprocal negotiation between the word and the image normally functions, paradoxically, at an imperceptible level for the spectator, as despite these operations of speech that contribute to a ‘making-visible’ of the unseen, we still cannot literally see what it is that we are being told about. The unseen image remains submissive, dependent on speech to make it somehow seen. However, if ‘graphic representation’ is shown to us (a monster or a blind man’s gouged-out eyes are Rancière’s examples here), we come into contact with a ‘brutal imposition in the field of vision’ and this ‘subordination of the visible to the making-visible of speech’ is surpassed and disrupted.¹²⁸ Rancière describes this disruption of the relationship between the visible and speech in terms of an ‘adjustment of vision’.¹²⁹

The second of the three adjustments is to do with the manner in which what we do not know is replaced by what we do know as we move through the process of spectating.

¹²⁷ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 113.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 114.

The notion of gradually acquiring information refers again to Aristotle's model of tragic theatre and

the construction of the order of representation: transferring the ethical *pathos* of knowledge into a stable relationship between a *poiesis* and an *aesthesis*; between an autonomous arrangement of actions and the bringing into operation of affects specific to the representative situation and it alone.¹³⁰

As with the adjustment of vision mentioned above, an adjustment of this kind can be noted when this sense of order is disturbed or exceeded in some way. For example, when we as spectators are in a situation in which either we, or a story-bound character, realise that too much knowledge has been received too soon, the 'stable relationship' of knowledge is destabilised. This second adjustment is, for Rancière, closely linked to the third, which is an adjustment of reality for the spectator. This adjustment is an essential feature of representation, because while we are aware that fictional characters, or 'entities of representation', are precisely that, their very fictionality reveals them to be agents resembling real people and real situations, or 'beings of resemblance', as Rancière terms it.¹³¹ This doubleness requires us to adjust our reality in a way, allowing for a link between 'the enjoyment of suspense in fiction and the actual pleasure of recognition'.¹³²

Taking this as an explanation of what he intends representation to mean, an explanation that clarifies his use of the word 'regime', and the notion that he sees representation as a constraining force, Rancière begins to move toward the idea that there are some conditions under which there is a possibility of unrepresentability. For him, this refers to the idea that there may be unrepresentable things, things that cannot be represented by artistic means. In saying that something is unrepresentable, Rancière refers to the

¹³⁰ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 115.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 116.

¹³² Ibid.

manner in which art cannot represent an unrepresentable thing due to its own characteristics, the characteristics of artistic presentation. These characteristics are, for Rancière, threefold. Firstly, the singularity of what it is that we are attempting to represent is something that cannot be represented by artistic means, which inherently involves a certain degree of repetition (whether this is in preparation, rehearsal, or performance) or a ‘surplus of presence’, to use his own phrase.¹³³ Secondly, this surplus of presence necessitates a certain lack of reality, which for Rancière begins to eradicate the serious existence of the thing to be represented. Finally, both of these characteristics function within what Rancière refers to as ‘a specific mode of address’, referring to the notion that the representation of something necessarily involves a distancing from it, in order to evoke the ‘affects of pleasure, play or distance’, which for him are inextricable from representation here.¹³⁴

This unrepresentability seems, for Rancière, to be linked to the regime in which the art in question is positioned. Therefore, the unrepresentable is present in one regime, but not in another, something that he illustrates using an extended example. Linking the regimes to their historical contexts as outlined above, and with an awareness of his assertion that unrepresentability is always conditional, it is possible to suggest that Rancière is implying that the unrepresentable also has not only a conditional, but a time-specific existence, something that is examined by him in relation to his primary examples in ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Corneille’s *Oedipe*. Rancière’s use of *Oedipus Rex* for his purpose here directly corresponds to the manner in which the French playwright, Pierre Corneille, in the mid-seventeenth century, took it upon himself to rework Sophocles’ play for the theatres and audiences of his time. Rancière notes, for the reasons outlined above based on perceived

¹³³ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 110.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

disruptions of various attributes of representation, that Corneille found *Oedipus Rex* to be ‘literally unrepresentable on the French stage’.¹³⁵ This seeming unrepresentability is not, Rancière stresses, associated with an inability to represent an event, but more to do with the conditions of representation of the specific regime in question (the representative regime in this case) at the time. As he continues:

Some things are unrepresentable as a function of the conditions to which a subject of representation must submit if it is to be part of a determinate regime of art, a specific regime of the relations between exhibition and signification.¹³⁶

Looking at this example, it can be suggested that one of these ‘conditions to which a subject of representation must submit if it is to be part of a determinate regime of art’ could be to do with time. In this case, as Corneille found, *Oedipus Rex* was literally unrepresentable for the theatres of mid-seventeenth century France. It is with this impulse that I venture the notion that the time-bound, historical unstageable is a condition under which an aspect of the Rancièrian unrepresentable can appear.

Rancière’s point here, in beginning his argument with Corneille’s reworking of what the playwright considered was a literally unrepresentable play at the time, is that nothing is unrepresentable. The corollary to this idea is that, for Rancière, everything is therefore representable. He completely refuses ‘that there are events and situations which are excluded in principle from the adequate connexion of a process of exhibition and a process of signification’, processes undeniably fundamental to representation.¹³⁷ This important moment in the essay is, like Corneille’s problem, anchored for us in a historical context by the writer. Rancière finds that it is possible to speculate that the rise of the ‘equally representable’ nature of events and situations is linked to the rise of Realism, epitomised for him, as for so many others, in the realist novel of the nineteenth

¹³⁵ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 112.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

century.¹³⁸ Ideas of Realism and Naturalism will return as I move towards an analysis of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol and its possibilities for twenty-first century rejuvenation, which will be shown to be problematic in terms of shifting perceptions and sensibilities regarding Realism.

However, while the notion that ‘everything is equal, equally representable’ pervades Rancière’s argument, it is clear that, despite his refutation of the unrepresentable, he appears to be calling our attention to certain conditions under which unrepresentability may or may not occur, and not solely to the unrepresentability or not of certain events.¹³⁹ Consequently, I venture that unstageability could be one of these conditions of which he speaks. As we have seen, Rancière views the ‘literal’ unrepresentability of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* in mid-seventeenth century France to be a feature of the representative regime of the time. His link between the ‘literally unrepresentable’ and historical context, maintained while questioning the existence of the unrepresentable in the first instance, seems to suggest that this question moves towards a *stageability* in terms of specificity of time and place. If Rancière doubts the existence of an unrepresentable, something that will shortly be explored in more detail, then it seems that what he is attempting to define in his discussion of *Oedipus Rex* and Corneille’s *Oedipe* has more to do with staging than representation, with unstageability than unrepresentability, with a time-bound unstageable than with an unrepresentable.

Questioning the existence of the unrepresentable further can be achieved by examining some interesting issues that arise in the translation of Rancière’s work from French into English. This is made additionally interesting by the fact that there are many different translators working on his writing. For example, *The Future of the Image* (*Le destin des*

¹³⁸ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 120.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

images) was translated by Gregory Elliott, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (*L'inconscient esthétique*) was translated by Debra Keates and James Swenson, and *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* (*Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*) was translated by Gabriel Rockhill. The plurality of translators here could indicate inconsistencies in terms of nuance and tone, and, querying some selected translations in terms of word usage, it is possible to wonder if perhaps the choices made by the translators could alter, however slightly, the meaning originally intended by Rancière. For example, the chapter entitled 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' (from *The Future of the Image*) in French reads '*S'il y a de l'irreprésentable*'. As mentioned above, my own translation of this phrase would read 'If there is an unrepresentable'. However, the translation choice made by Gregory Elliott here would seem to suggest the removal of what Rancière may have intended to be an extra element of doubt as to the existence of the unrepresentable. Elliott omits this doubt and moves directly towards the notion of the unrepresentable as a feature (or not) of 'things'. Indeed, towards the beginning of the chapter, Rancière states that '[t]he issue raised by [his] title does not call for a straightforward yes or no'.¹⁴⁰ However, this 'issue' in Elliott's English translation of the title would appear to centre around 'things' that could be unrepresentable or not, as distinct from whether there *is* an unrepresentable or not, as indicated by Rancière's original French title. Although Elliott poses the issue in the form of a question, it is a questioning of the unrepresentability (or not) of examples, and not a query as to the existence of an unrepresentable more generally.

¹⁴⁰ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 109.

Illustrating the possibilities of the unstageable.

As will be shown in their respective chapters, each example I will explore emerges from a moment that can be described as a distinct theatrical, historical and/or political crisis point. The theatre's response in each of these cases engenders a perception of unstageability, on the point of the practitioner or audience member(s). Implicit in this selection of examples is the sense that such points of crisis, often directly relatable to what I have defined as the unrepresentable, also speak to the need for an unstageable in theatrical terms. While the three examples remain distinct in geographical, historical, and theatrical terms, as well as standing for examples of the possibilities of unstageability for the purposes of this thesis, their connection through time and theme is perceptible through a concentration on each example as illustrative of a certain crisis point.

In Chapter One, I will be situating Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, first published in 1867, within a post-Romantic context. With perceptible ties to the 'mental theatre' of Romantic poets such as Byron and Shelley, I will discuss across the chapter the ways in which this Romanticism arguably led to Ibsen's writing an (apparently) unstageable play. The play's historical context, emerging from the Romantic movement and anticipating the emergence of Modernism, seems to simultaneously create and stand for a certain crossroads in theatrical form, in which I can identify a possibility of the unstageable. Straddling two significant artistic movements, *Peer Gynt* looks back towards Romanticism and forward to Modernism, while being additionally situated at the beginning of the realist movement in theatre, which consistently announces its debt to Ibsen as one of its greatest progenitors.

Within the framework of the thesis, Ibsen's play activates the second example and Chapter Two, which concerns the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. While, as will be argued in Chapter One, *Peer Gynt* seemed to become increasingly stageable over time, the Grand-Guignol began to move in a contrasting direction from the early 1940s until the closing of the Parisian theatre in November 1962. These parallel shifts in stageability will be mapped as a means of somewhat bridging the gap from Ibsen's Norway / Italy to the Grand-Guignol's France, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and from a literary work to a performance style. Additionally, considering the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the context of the trauma of the Second World War allows me to discuss the notion that the possibilities of the unstageable hovering around the late iteration of this performance style emerge in response to a crisis in the form that cannot be rehabilitated in a postwar setting. I will discuss in the chapter on the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol the various academic wrangles over the demise of the Parisian theatre, and the causes for this that have been attributed to the rise of cinema as well as the aftermath of the Second World War. Additionally, the apparent unstageability connected to the Grand-Guignol has not, until now, been associated with its theatrical historical context. I will argue below that the emergence of unstageability connected with the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the mid-twentieth century can be examined in relation to the theatrical work that developed in Europe (and in the United States) after its closure. There are examples of theatre and performance practitioners in the late 1960s and 1970s who were concerned with what we might call, referring to Lyotard's work on the unrepresentable, staging the unstageable, or staging that there is some unstageable. With this in mind, though this will be returned to in more detail in Chapter Two, it is possible to argue that the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, and its staging of graphically realistic horror stories, frequently drawn from the newspapers, was too far removed from the onward trajectory of European theatre and performance for its work to continue to be staged.

For me, the decline of stageability at the Grand-Guignol begins to align itself in an interesting way with Jacques Rancière's thoughts on unrepresentability. In this chapter I attempt to associate what Rancière defines as 'literal unrepresentability' with my own thoughts on unstageability. While I refer to another time, and certainly to another form of theatre, to Rancière's discussion of Corneille's adaptation, the parallels become clear as I discuss the later years of the Grand-Guignol in Paris, and, interestingly, its attempted revival in 2009 by a British theatre company. This production, with twenty-first century playwrights, design aesthetics, and audiences, helps to illuminate the synchronic nature of unstageability that I attempt to define in the thesis. Additionally, as mentioned, the use of Grand-Guignol theatre in Chapter Two charts a different kind of unstageability to that examined in relation to *Peer Gynt* in Chapter One. The dimension of the audience becomes increasingly important in relation to this example. While unstageability is not to be confused with the idea that something would 'work' or 'not work' for an audience at the theatre, the historical and social context of spectators at a particular time (in this case, post-Second World War Paris) remains a significant aspect of the theatrical experience, particularly regarding the phenomenon of Grand-Guignol and its reliance on its audiences, both regular and new.

With this in mind, Chapter Two of the thesis sets up the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol as a second model through which my working definition of unstageable, arrived at via Rancière, can be examined. The relatively under-researched performance style lends itself in a most interesting manner to the illustration of this definition, being bound by historical context in such a specific way. The genre's resurrection by The Sticking Place theatre company in 2009, and the critical response to their production, *Terror 2009*, places additional emphasis on the distinct period of time during which the Théâtre du

Grand-Guignol became known as ‘a theatre of physical violence where blood flowed by the bucketful and the horror [was] so intense that audiences would flee the auditorium or lose consciousness’.¹⁴¹ The movement from a definite sense of stageability to an unstageability, in contrast to *Peer Gynt*’s struggle to dissociate itself from the label of ‘unstageable’, also allows for an alternative reading of the decline of the Grand-Guignol, which is debated by most scholars who have published work on the genre. While my reading acknowledges the comprehensive arguments previously presented, it also attempts to appreciate them in a more positive light than has hitherto been employed. The importance of geographical and historical difference between *Peer Gynt* and Grand-Guignol is mirrored in the manner in which Chapter Two moves towards Chapter Three. Indeed, as Inga-Stina Ewbank discusses in ‘Shakespeare, Ibsen and the Unspeakable’, the ‘separate but sometimes similar ways’ examples can be used in order to illustrate a theory or thought is often of utmost importance.¹⁴²

Looking at examples from two recent pieces of work presented by Società Raffaello Sanzio, additional aspects of the unstageable come into view. Significantly, the contextualisation of the Italian theatre company through a post-Holocaust lens returns the thesis to Lyotard’s notion of the unrepresentable and unrepresentable, as outlined particularly in *Heidegger and “the jews”*, and to Rancière’s opposition of this work, suggesting a different impulse and direction for unrepresentability. I will be discussing specific sections from two of Società Raffaello Sanzio’s twenty-first century productions, namely *Tragedia Endogonidia*, and *Purgatorio*, the second of three pieces exploring Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Moving through this selection of examples, I will

¹⁴¹ Richard Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 12.

¹⁴² Inga-Stina Ewbank, ‘Shakespeare, Ibsen And The Unspeakable: An Inaugural Lecture’ (London: Bedford College, 1976), p. 3.

attempt to uncover a sense that unstageability is present in much of this work as a certain sort of refusal. For me, this will be connected to the post-Holocaust writings of Georges Didi-Huberman.

These pieces by Societas Raffaello Sanzio present examples of the challenges faced by what might be termed a contemporary understanding of the unstageable. While Chapters One and Two depict examples that, retrospectively, can be analysed in terms of a historical unstageability, the third cannot rely on this in the same way, and so must focus on what it is that leads us to call something unstageable, now, even if this leads towards an acceptance of a certain refusal or absence of the unstageable in our own time. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the idea of what a spectator might find unwatchable mingles with an ethical sense of what is stageable, or perhaps what is deemed ‘appropriate’. This idea will appear again in Chapter Three in a discussion of the ethics of staging in the twenty-first century. This discussion provides part of the backdrop for an examination of Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s *BR.#04*, which saw a young baby placed upon the stage, alone. The image sparked significant debate when the performance piece played in Dublin in 2003, causing the word ‘unstageable’ to be mentioned as theatre practitioners, reviewers, and scholars attempted to untangle appropriateness, ethical care of the actor, and unwatchability, an unruly skein of thoughts, opinions, and facts that has remained inextricably knotted.

This idea of what might lie beyond the realm of the stageable as a thread that runs through this thesis, thinks about the limits of the theatre, and also about reaching past the boundaries of those limits. The theatrical moments I will explore focus on specific points in time, almost becoming snapshots of a ‘currently unstageable’, in which what the medium of theatre is able to do at that time is, fleetingly, expanded and extended.

The desire for a medium to have limits, something that has been explored in the work of the modernist playwrights to which Martin Puchner refers in *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*, is strengthened and supported by the idea that there are, and will remain, some things that the theatre cannot do.

Chapter One: *Peer Gynt*

This chapter begins with a brief consideration of two observations about Ibsen's theatrical-historical position. In 1890, C.H. Herford's review of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea* was published in the British periodical *The Academy*.¹ In this joint review, 'The Two Last Plays of Ibsen', Herford likens the climax of *Rosmersholm* (published in 1886) to those of the earlier plays *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* (1866 and 1867 respectively), and reminds the reader that Ibsen 'bears within him a sleeping romantic poet, who, however resolutely lulled, will sometimes stir and cry'.² In 2006, situating Ibsen within the artistic context of his time, and simultaneously reclaiming his work for modernist literary criticism, Toril Moi writes that

Ibsen, then, suffers a peculiar kind of double erasure, in which the anti-theatricalist modernists find him too theatrical, and the pro-theatrical avant-garde does not find him theatrical enough.³

For me, Herford's and Moi's assertions provide complementary departure points for this chapter's discussion of the possibilities of unstageability in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. On the one hand, the Romantic climate into which the Norwegian writer emerged in the mid-nineteenth century is clearly visible in his play of 1867, particularly in its articulation and critique of various Romantic ideals and characteristics. On the other, the emergence of Modernism at the very end of the nineteenth century, and the various breaks with artistic convention that followed, suggests a sense that Ibsen's literary drama would be

¹ *The Academy* was published in Britain 1869-1916. Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism: In Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent and London: Academia Press, 2009), p. 1.

² Michael Egan, ed., *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 144. It is also interesting to note that these two plays would have been Ibsen's two most recent works at the time, and not the two final plays of Ibsen, which were to be *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). Additionally, during 1890, Ibsen would write and publish *Hedda Gabler*.

³ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 30.

simultaneously berated in the twentieth century for its lack of self-referentiality to the theatrical form, and for its lack of focus on the body in performance.⁴

Thus, the possibilities of the unstageable in *Peer Gynt* might be said to emerge through the situation of Ibsen's play in its specific theatrical-historical moment. For example, the combination of Romantic theatrical concepts of closet drama and 'mental theatre', and the Modernist suspicion of the theatrical medium, create a specific historical space where unstageability in *Peer Gynt* might be said to operate.⁵ Additionally, and in accordance with the theoretical framework established so far in this thesis, an approaching shift to the Rancièrian aesthetic regime arguably presents a certain crisis point in form, creating the possibility of what Rancière refers to as unrepresentability. In this theatrically-specific sense of unstageability as a subset of Rancièrian unrepresentability, similarly dependent on historical context, a sense of the unstageable is discernible in the historical moment covering the period of time between the publication and first production of *Peer Gynt*. This unstageability relates both to the work of the audience and to the historical context of the playwright, and the shift (Rancièrian or otherwise), it can be argued, relates to what Raymond Williams refers to as the 'loss of vitality' in the Romantic drama.⁶

With this in mind, this chapter will explore, amongst other things, the theatrical and historical specificities of the moment (1867) in which Ibsen wrote a play that, by his

⁴ Moi refers to Artaud and Brecht both writing about Ibsen in this way.

⁵ Byron's notion of 'mental theatre' will be returned to below. It is referred to in Shou-ren Wang, *The Theatre of the Mind* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) and George Taylor, *The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 120. The Modernist suspicion of the theatre has been referred to in the thesis introduction re: Martin Puchner's work in *Stage Fright* (2002).

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (London: Peregrine Books, 1964), p. 108

own admission, was ‘not for acting’.⁷ These contextual specificities will particularly relate to the situation of *Peer Gynt* in a post-Romanticist, pre-Modernist context. Nine years after its publication, in 1876, responses by critics to the first production of *Peer Gynt* will allow a framework for the discussion of the possibilities of the unstageable, particularly in relation to the critics’ conceptualisation of the unstageable in relation to my own, and also in terms of how these possibilities might continue to be apparent in the midst of the play’s staging. Thus, this period of time, from 1867 to 1876, will be explored in the chapter in the context of a post-Romanticist, pre-Modernist theatrical shift, noting that, if there is an unstageable in this context, its possibilities seem to arise in this particular transformation of a text to a production under these conditions. Finally, the manner in which unstageability is conceptualised in relation to *Peer Gynt* in the early twenty-first century will be examined in relation to the National Theatre of Scotland’s 2007 production of the play.

Peer Gynt

While the reader may well be familiar with the details of the eponymous character, a summary outline of the *Peer Gynt* will perhaps engender a more acute sense of ways in which a discussion of the play as ‘unstageable’ could stem from the reading of various components of narrative and setting. It will also allow me to move from this digested version of the play into a discussion of its historical and theatrical context. The play concerns the story of Peer Gynt, a semi-fictional character discovered by Ibsen when reading Peter Christen Asbjørnsen’s Norwegian folk tales and fairy tales. These fanciful tales, as full of trolls and unruly sons as Ibsen’s play, are also loosely based in truth, as

⁷ A paraphrasing of a quote from Wilhelm Bergsøe which will be returned to below. The original is quoted in Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry, 1864-1822* (London: Rupert-Hart Davis, 1971), p. 65.

Ibsen was able to reveal. Asbjørnsen (1812-1885), though born in Christiania, had family roots in a rural Norwegian district called Gudbrandsdalen. Ibsen mentions in a letter to Frederik Hegel in August 1867 that 'Peer Gynt is a real person, who lived in Gudbrandsdal, probably at the end of last, or the beginning of this, century'.⁸ Additionally, it is worth noting that in the summer of 1862, Ibsen was travelling through the Norwegian countryside collecting folk-lore when he stopped for a while in Gudbrandsdalen. He possibly came across the name of 'Peer Gynt' here, as he mentions in an 1867 letter to his publisher Frederik Hegel that '[Peer Gynt's] name is still well-known among the peasants there; but of his exploits not much more is known than is to be found in Asbjørnsen's *Norwegian Fairy-Tale Book*'.⁹

In terms of the play's plot, we follow Peer's fantastical, fairytale journey over five acts. The first act sees Peer fight with his mother Aase, gatecrash a wedding and steal the bride, while also noticing and perhaps falling in love with a young girl called Solveig. Act Two opens with Peer's abandonment of his kidnapped bride and his enjoyment of three troll girls. His decision to marry another troll girl is swiftly reversed when he discovers that he must submit himself to certain cosmetic procedures in order to be accepted as a troll. Reluctant to have his eyes slit with a knife, he flees, only to have his first encounter with the Boyg, an enigmatic organism who appears throughout the play, always advising Peer to 'go round' him. A brief meeting with Solveig and her sister closes this act, and the third opens with Peer building a house in a forest. Solveig arrives, having abandoned her family to come to him. Peer is overwhelmed by love and joy. He continues his building, only to be met by the troll girl he refused to marry previously, who has borne his son. She threatens to return to his house every day to

⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Letters of Henrik Ibsen*, trans. by J.N. Laurvik and Mary Morison, reprinted from original 1908 edition, (Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), p. 137

⁹ Ibid.

share him with Solveig, so Peer leaves the forest, telling Solveig to wait for him. He makes a brief visit to his mother's home, where she dies in his arms, and then leaves his land at the end of the third act.

Act Four sees Peer as a prosperous middle-aged businessman, entertaining colleagues in Morocco. He has dealt in various trades, buying and selling everything from rum to Bibles. He runs away with a dancing girl named Anitra, who steals his fortune and leaves him stranded in a desert. After encounters with the Sphinx and a short spell in a lunatic asylum, Peer finds himself on board a ship bound homeward to Norway at the beginning of the fifth act. When he is shipwrecked, Peer saves himself and finally reaches home, only to meet a mysterious Button-Moulder, who informs him of his intent to melt Peer down in his casting-ladle due to the uselessness of his life. Peer begs for some time to prove the Button-Moulder wrong. After encountering a number of people from his past who seem to describe him in similar terms to the Button-Moulder, Peer eventually returns to Solveig, who has waited for him since his departure. With the Button-Moulder's threats ringing in his ears, Solveig cradles him in her arms as he falls asleep.

With this introduction to the playtext in place, it is possible to begin to discuss the theatrical-historical context of the play, as well as its context in the work of the playwright. As articulated in the introduction, the possibilities of the unstageable discussed across this thesis emerge in a shift from one theatrical form to another, and/or one historical moment to another. Indeed, the significance of the use of these particular three examples is that each of them represents a certain crisis point in form or in history, that for the purposes of my argument corresponds with the development of a sense of unstageability. The situation of each of these examples in its particular theatrical-

historical context continues to be an indication of the dependency of the possibilities of the unstageable upon such context. For me, this relates to the notion that unstageability, if and when it can be said to arise, emerges as a different kind of unstageability in different historical and theatrical contexts. The possibilities of the unstageable frequently relate to the work of the audience in its socio-historical context, and this changes from context to context. Thus, in the case of each example in this thesis, the particular the shift that is responsible for the appearance of the possibilities of the unstageable in that specific case, must be clearly articulated. In the case of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, my discussion of the play's position in a post-Romanticist, pre-Modernist context is the shift that allows a certain sense of unstageability to emerge.

Romanticism and Ibsen

Arthur Lovejoy noted in 1924 that 'the word "romantic" has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing'.¹⁰ In 'On the Discriminations of Romanticisms', Lovejoy finds fault with the range of attempts made by critics to construct a theory of Romanticism that pertains to a particular explosion of literary and artistic talent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, compares various European movements with which the term has been associated (finding no commonalities), and advising the reader to think of a plurality of Romanticisms as distinct from a singular usage.¹¹ This analysis of a multi-dimensional word has some resonance with this thesis' discussion of a contextually-dependent and theatrically specific sense of unstageability. However, my reference to Lovejoy here derives from his exploration of Romanticism specifically, as it reminds me that a connection between the latter, and the work of Ibsen, must be

¹⁰ Arthur Lovejoy, 'On the Discriminations of Romanticisms' in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1948), 228-253, 228

¹¹ Lovejoy, p. 232.

considered in the light of some traits of Romanticism in European theatre, and not in the closed terms of a particular trend, movement, literary school or genre.

With this mind, while there may be no defining feature of Romanticism in literature or art, there is a range of characteristics that may be associated with it. This was a suggestion put forward by Rene Wellek in an article in *Comparative Literature* in 1949. Wellek proposed three 'criteria' by which Romantic literature (of the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century) might be loosely grouped, including 'imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style'.¹² Aware that these suggested shared characteristics of Romantic writing pre-exist the writers to whom he attributes them, Wellek notes that his traits represent ideas in literature which have been 'translated into terms acceptable to men who [have] undergone the experience of the Enlightenment'.¹³ In other words, Wellek reminds us that he is proposing the application of the criteria to the literature in the historical context of the time, as well as to the literature itself.¹⁴ Thus, as he continues with an example, while the reader may certainly encounter the use of imagery or symbols in literature which pre-dates the late eighteenth century, 'the change from the type of imagery or symbolism used by Pope to that used by Shelley is an empirical fact of history'.¹⁵

Such traits of Romanticism can be also seen in the arts over the same period of time. European theatre in the early decades of the nineteenth century sought inspiration in

¹² Rene Wellek, 'The Concept of "Romanticism" in Literary History', *Comparative Literature*, 1:2 (Spring 1949), 147-172, 147.

¹³ Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁴ However, it must also be noted that Wellek draws some interesting conclusions regarding Byron, who, in his apparent lack of 'the romantic conception of imagination', renders him a lesser writer. Wellek, p. 165.

¹⁵ Wellek, p. 171.

nature, prized the imagination and strong emotional feeling, as well as the individual (both writer and character).¹⁶ With this in mind, it is not surprising that many of the English Romantics wrote plays in the early 1800s which focused on long monologues (Shelley's *The Cenci*, Keats' *Otho the Great*, Wordsworth's *The Borderers*), and it is equally predictable that these plays did not succeed when produced at the theatre.¹⁷ However, it can also be argued that such an emphasis on individualism could also be seen in well-received European productions (often of Shakespeare or other pre-Romantic era plays) with 'star' actors in leading roles, a prominence of casting that can still be seen today in the West End and Broadway, where film stars and other celebrities play leading roles to huge popular acclaim.¹⁸

An aspect of Romanticism in relation to the arts that is particularly relevant for the purpose of this chapter is the Romantic fascination with nationhood and national history. For example, in music of the time, this could be seen in the work of Frederic Chopin, who used the *mazurka* dance of his native Poland in his piano compositions; Antonín Dvořák and Leoš Janáček, whose uses of Bohemian and Moravian (now both part of Czech Republic) folk melodies and rhythm respectively led to the composition of popular symphonic and solo works; and Edvard Grieg, whose music will be returned to later in this chapter, but who utilised Norwegian folk dance structures and themes in orchestral music. In the theatre, this interest was similarly explored across Europe through the use of national folk tales and history as narrative bases for plays. Such a

¹⁶ This information comes from, among others, Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*; Jane Moody 'The theatrical revolution, 1776-1843' in *Cambridge History of British Theatre vol. 2*, ed. by Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199-215.

¹⁷ For example, Kenneth Cameron and Horst Frenz in 'The Stage History of Shelley's *The Cenci*' devote the first part of their article to a discussion of the play as 'unsuitable for stage production'. Also, while the play 'pleased' the select audience to whom it was performed privately at the Shelley Society in May 1886, they describe as 'not untypical' reactions to the performance such as 'laboriously proving the worthlessness of *The Cenci* for all practical stage purposes'. *PMLA*, 60: 4 (Dec 1945), 1080-1105.

¹⁸ Examples include Edmund Kean (England), Ludwig Devrient (Germany), Johannes Brun (Norway).

dedication to the ‘peculiarly national’, as the Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger phrased it, was particularly evident in Norway.¹⁹ The direct influence of Norwegian folk tales on *Peer Gynt* has been highlighted above. In a more logistical capacity, Ibsen’s role in the setting up of a Norwegian National Theatre, and the notion of exploring national stories and legends in order to create a national theatrical canon (a model repeated particularly in Finland, Iceland and Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), further emphasises Ibsen’s connection to some of the tenets of Romantic nationalism.²⁰

In terms of his writing, it was frequently noted by Ibsen scholars throughout the twentieth century that, in general, his earlier plays are related to the Romantic tradition.²¹ However, it was not until 1982 that Errol Durbach’s study, *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays*, revealed a hitherto unexplored notion, that the Romanticism in Ibsen’s earlier work remained traceable right across his oeuvre. This monograph bears out the statement made by Herford quoted at the start of this chapter, and argues that aspects of Romantic literature persist alongside anti-Romantic sentiments in plays from *The Wild Duck* (1884) to *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). The implications of this source for my own work stem from its discussion of the proximity of such Romantic/anti-Romantic traits, bolstering a discussion of Ibsen as a

¹⁹ Quoted in Marvin Carlson’s chapter ‘Nationalism and the Romantic Drama in Europe’ in *Romantic Drama*, ed. by Gerard Ernest and Paul Gillespie, (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1994) 139-152, 142.

²⁰ Further information on this in Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin, eds., *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012); Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); Sveinn Einarsson, *A People’s Theatre Comes of Age: A Study of the Icelandic Theatre* (Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 2007); William Wilson, *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974),

²¹ John Northam, *Ibsen: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 31; James McFarlane, *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 13; F.J. Marker and L.L. Marker *A History of Scandinavian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 148. Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. xvi.

post-Romantic, pre-Modernist writer, and the possibilities of the unstageable that could emerge from such a categorisation. A historical contextualisation of *Peer Gynt* thus begins with an exploration of its Romantic characteristics, and will continue from that point in an examination of its pre- or proto-Modernist traits. This work will include analysis of the text as well as more general descriptions of the play's context, both in the professional lifespan of the playwright, and the theatrical operations of the time.

An obvious example from the text with which to illustrate Ibsen's particular take on the Romantic context can be seen in the very first scene of *Peer Gynt*. Here, Peer, 'a strongly built youth of twenty' has arrived at his mother's farm. He tells her (Aase) about a hunt that he has been on, and describes the various adventures he had while stalking reindeer. In a lengthy passage, Peer relates how he shot the reindeer to stun it, and then straddled it, preparing to kill the animal, whereupon the reindeer stood up (with Peer on its back) and raced off across a ridge of mountains, before plunging down a crevasse into a mountain lake. From this point, they swam together to safety, and Peer ran home to his mother.

The lyrical use of language describing nature is a common Romantic literary trait. In this passage, Peer describes the view from the mountain ridge as the reindeer ran at speed:

Before us as we thundered
It was as though there glittered suns.
Brown backs of eagles swam
In the huge and dizzy void hallway between us
And the lakes below – they fell behind
Like motes of dust.²²

²² Ibsen, p. 30.

Looking at Wellek's criteria as outlined above, this excerpt certainly corresponds to ideas such as the use of nature, imagination, and myth. Indeed, deer and stags have long been used as symbols in certain tales from mythology.²³

Additionally, it is interesting to note that Aase, according to stage directions, is physically overcome by the language used by Peer, in a manner resonant with Longinus' discussion of the effect of sublime language on the hearer, which was outlined in the introduction to this thesis as a precursor to contemporary thoughts on unrepresentability and unstageability. Indeed, the contradictory nature of the Burkean sublime, and additionally the Kantian sublime, particularly the intertwining relationship posited between awe and terror in the face of the sublime, appealed to Romantic writers generally. Specifically, Wordsworth noted that the sublime 'calls upon the mind to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining'.²⁴ Returning to *Peer Gynt*, on three occasions during Peer's tale in the first scene, Ibsen's parenthetical stage directions, indicating how a line should be spoken (or read), use language associated with overwhelming response. Firstly, when Peer mentions the reindeer's running away with him (Peer) on its back, Aase's line ('In the name of Christ!') is marked 'involuntarily' by Ibsen.²⁵ Shortly after this, as Peer describes 'the huge and dizzy void halfway between us and the lakes below' while the reindeer skims across the mountain ridge, Aase's line is designated 'dazed' by the

²³ I am particularly aware of their use in the Greek and Celtic traditions. In Greek mythology, Artemis turned Actaeon into a stag. In Celtic mythology, Sadb (future wife of Fionn Mac Cumhail and mother of Oisín) was turned into a deer by a druid. Marianthe Colakis and Mary Joan Masello, *Classical Mythology and More* (Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2007), p. 197; Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), p. 404

²⁴ Wordsworth *Prose*, II, 354, quoted in James Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) p. 98.

²⁵ Ibsen, p. 30.

playwright.²⁶ Finally, during Peer's account of the fall into the mountain lake, Aase 'gasps for breath' as she speaks.²⁷

In terms of comparison with Romantic writers, one particular literary comparison that can be made is with an extract from William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Book 1 of this epic poem, published in fourteen volumes after Wordsworth's death in 1850, features a middle section detailing the poet's stealing of a boat he comes across in a cave. He rows the boat confidently and proudly out onto a lake, noting the landscape all around him, from the '[s]mall circles glittering idly in the moon' that his manipulation of the oars has created in the water, to the 'craggy ridge' emerging in his eyeline as he rows further from the shore.²⁸ Growing frightened by the image of the dark crag above him, which seems to him to anthropomorphise 'with purpose of its own / And measure motion like a living Thing, / Strode after me', the boy returns the boat and heads for home.²⁹ For me, the comparisons here lie particularly in the evocation of an unexpected adventure through nature, as well as its power in relation to the human. In *Peer Gynt*, Peer is powerless to stop the reindeer, and similarly vulnerable to the steep fall from the edge of the mountain. In *The Prelude*, the poet retreats from his previously optimistic journey in the face of the magnitude of the cliff face, and its seeming alive. Additionally, the solo nature of both of these explorations, and the language used by both writers in their portrayal of the natural landscape, provide further grounds for comparison.

Of course, a key point of difference to note here, and a general indication of *Peer Gynt*'s creation as a satire on Norwegian romantic nationalism as distinct from Romantic writing *per se*, is that Peer's story is found by his mother to have been a fabrication, or a re-telling of an old story Aase had heard in her youth, 'smartened up

²⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts* (Penguin: London, 1995), p. 10

²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

and put in new clothes... a story I'd heard in my mother's lap'.³⁰ Thus, the passage analysed above can be seen to be simultaneously introducing some of the imagery and metaphors that will recur throughout the play (deer, falling) and parodying the ideas of sublimity and evocative descriptions of nature that are clearly associated with the Romantic literary tradition.

Before I turn to a parallel exploration of the play's position as a pre-Modernist text, it is already possible to begin to discuss the ways in which the possibilities of the unstageable have their roots in this text's situation within a post-Romanticist context. Ibsen's simultaneous articulation and parody of some of the tropes of the Romantic literary tradition in *Peer Gynt*, as analysed above, could suggest a sense of a gathering momentum, of an approaching shift from one form or style to another. Thinking through this in terms of the theoretical framework of this thesis, it could be inferred that this shift could open up a moment of unstageability, a theatrically-specific sense of the kind of unrepresentability to which Lyotard and Rancière refer as outlined in the introduction. Further to this it is possible to suggest that as the play is emerging from one context it is, even unconsciously, anticipating the next. Ibsen's historical context in this regard encapsulates this sense that artistic movements or trends do not neatly begin and end at specific moments in time, but shift and change over varying lengths of time, usually for a variety of social, political, economical and/or historical reasons.

To take a brief example from another historical context and another artform, the life (and work) of the composer Ludwig van Beethoven is generally considered to straddle the Classical and Romantic musical movements, due to his lifespan (1770-1827) and the

³⁰ Ibsen, p. 32.

discernible characteristics of his compositions.³¹ Extending the Classical traditions of precise texture, a tonic-dominant key struggle, and the development of dynamic and melodic range, and exploring Romantic aspects such as chromaticism, rich texture, and a freer sense of form, Beethoven's oeuvre can be seen as bordering the Classical and Romantic periods in music. In a comparable way, as will be related below, *Peer Gynt*'s position in terms of Ibsen's playwriting career suggests a similar link between the Romantic and Modernist traditions, a link that can be understood in terms of a shift from the former to the latter, and thus indicative of a space in which the possibilities of the unstageable might be said to emerge.

Modernism

At a basic level, Modernism in theatre refers to a late nineteenth century and early twentieth century sense of breaking with convention, an attempt to eliminate a variety of restraints that had previously pervaded art practices, and the expansion of artistic content, form and technique in challenging and previously unexplored directions.³² In a manner that recalls the discussion of Romanticism(s) above, resistance to an inflexible definition of Modernism is palpable in the work of theatre historians on the subject, a wariness of rigidity made additionally urgent due to the word's multiplicity of meanings in a range of contexts (as Lovejoy noted regarding the word 'romantic').³³ Further to this, the practice adhered to above, whereby characteristics associated with

³¹ This is referred to in Nancy Bachus, ed., *The Romantic Piano: The Influence of Society, Style and Musical Trends on the Great Piano Composers* (California: Alfred Music Publishing, 2006), p. 10; Gloria K. Fiero, *The Humanistic Tradition, Book 5* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 60; John M. Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 617; Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization, Volume II: Since 1500* (Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2008), p. 661.

³² These thoughts on definition come from, amongst others, Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-5; Frederick Marker and Christopher Innes, eds., *Modernism in European Drama* (Toronto and London: 1998), pp. x-xiii.

³³ Martin Puchner writes about this in *Stage Fright* (p. 2), invoking Richard Scheppard's *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism*.

Romanticism were discussed in relation to Ibsen's work, preferable to an attempt to situate Ibsen within a Romantic movement, will be followed here. My work makes an effort to locate a context for *Peer Gynt*, historically and theatrically, and not to reclaim Ibsen for any particular cause. From that point, it will be possible to specifically discuss the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge from the theatrical-historical context of the play's publication and first production.

For Ibsen, the movement away from a Romantic approach happened in a variety of ways, some more explicit than others. For example, his decisive technical shift from the poetic, verse structure of works such as *Peer Gynt* (also *Brand* and *Emperor and Galilean*) to the prose style of plays beginning with *The League of Youth* (1869) was highlighted in a letter from May 1883, in which he notes that he has turned to 'the very much more difficult art of writing the genuine, plain language spoken in real life', suggesting a break with the Romantic poetry visible in *Peer Gynt*, even when the content of such language is deflated, as discussed above in terms of Act One, Scene One.³⁴ In terms of content, moving from folk tales and ancient history to a more contemporary exploration of human relationships, Raymond Williams has noted that, while Ibsen's characters in the prose plays may seem similar to characters in Romantic dramas, their conversations and actions indicate a movement away from Romantic theatrical frameworks. Taking the example of *A Doll's House* (1879), Williams catalogues the characters and main plot points of the play, aligning them all with familiar Romantic drama tropes, but stating that 'the novelty... is that these deliberate romantic puppets are suddenly jerked into life'.³⁵ Suggesting that the climactic discussions between Torvald and Nora towards the end of the play are merely

³⁴ Mary Morison, ed., *The Correspondence of Henrik Ibsen* (New York: Haskell House: 1905), pp. 367-8.

³⁵ Williams p. 76.

rhetorical, and that the play ‘does not go deeper than the usual mechanism of intrigue’, he classifies this as anti-romantic drama, as its presentation of ‘mechanical versions of experience’ serves only to reverse Romantic structures, and does not completely reject them.³⁶

Mapping this notion onto *Peer Gynt*, it is possible to suggest that the traits of a Romantic hero, obvious in Peer’s character and actions, are subverted and disrupted throughout. The Romantic hero, a protagonist characterised in the dramatic literature of Schiller (Wallenstein), Hugo (Hernani) and Byron (Manfred) amongst others, tends to rely on the self and to turn inward, as Peer Gynt does, ‘[seeking] in the form of his own selfhood a model of order for his world’.³⁷ This kind of character responds to the emphasis placed on the individual by Romantic writers, and is frequently seen to be wandering through the world in some way, melancholic, solipsistic, haunted and questing. However, from the opening line, ‘Peer, you’re lying!’ to the final encounter with the Button Moulder, who aims to melt Peer down in his casting ladle, because ‘one occasionally moulds a button / That’s useless’, we are aware that Ibsen’s hero does not correspond neatly to the tropes of Romantic literature, and parodies the role throughout, an additional facet of the movement away from Romantic traditions of writing and towards a modernist approach.³⁸

Indeed, a most striking example of a connection between *Peer Gynt* and the modernist theatres of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is the French premiere of

³⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁷ Jeffrey Cox, ‘Romantic Redefinitions of the Tragic’ in *Romantic Drama*, ed. by Gerald Ernest and Paul Gillespie (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1994), p. 159.

³⁸ Ibsen, p. 29; p. 161

the play, which took place at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre in Paris in November 1896.³⁹ Directed by the theatre's founder, Aurélien Lugné-Poë, and featuring Alfred Jarry (whose seminal play *Ubu Roi* would premiere at the same theatre the following month) in the role of the Troll King, this production provides a clear indication that *Peer Gynt* was regarded as significant to early modernist work. Lugné-Poë was committed to the staging of the late nineteenth century work of French early modernist writers including Jarry and Maurice Maeterlinck (whose *Pelleas et Mélisande* was the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's inaugural production), and to the introduction of the work of Ibsen and Strindberg to the Parisian theatrical scene. With this in mind, his production of *Peer Gynt* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre shows the playtext emerging into a modernist context, while retaining its Romanticist roots as explored above.

Interestingly, Toril Moi notes that *Peer Gynt* (and *Brand*) is not central to a discussion of Ibsen's transition to Modernism, focusing her examination instead on the contemporaneous epic *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) by virtue of its 'consciousness of the absolute bankruptcy of idealism' and 'advanced metatheatrical and meta-aesthetic reflections', criteria to which she adheres in her exploration of Ibsen's Modernisms.⁴⁰ However, it seems that *Peer Gynt* may be analysed in the light of such criteria, and while Moi may not find the play critical to her study, it remains a particularly interesting example for an exploration of the kinds of unstageability that can be perceived in relation to the shift from Romanticism to Modernism.

For example, it seems that a 'bankruptcy of idealism' can relate to various aspects of *Peer Gynt*. The kind of idealism to which Moi refers here relates to ideas of sublimity as

³⁹ Information from International Repertoire Database for Ibsen Plays, <http://ibsen.nb.no> [accessed 13 May 2013].

⁴⁰ Moi, p. 9

explored in the introduction to this thesis. In *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (and Moi notes at least twice that she is speaking in monograph-specific terms), Moi defines idealism as a particularly nineteenth century (and particularly Romantic) aesthetic understanding, influenced primarily by Hegel and Kierkegaard, of ‘the belief that the task of art...is to uplift us, to point the way to the Ideal’.⁴¹ Invoking Michael Bell’s article, ‘The Metaphysics of Modernism’, which discusses Modernism in light of ‘the collapse of idealism’, Moi notes that a breakdown in such idealist aesthetics can be regarded as a departure point for Modernism. Thus, for Moi, Ibsen’s application of this collapse to his work is indicative of his status as a modernist writer. Looking at *Peer Gynt*, it is possible to suggest that the play can be read as an articulation of the effect of this sense of idealism on the egotistical central character, who is, as George Bernard Shaw writes, ‘an idealist...setting up as his ideal the realization of himself through the utter satisfaction of his own will’.⁴² Peer’s failure to achieve this ideal could certainly be seen as a bankruptcy of idealism, and is particularly in evidence in the ‘onion’ scene, Act Five, Scene Five. In this scene, Peer peels away the layers of a wild onion one by one, describing the layers as he goes. Hoping that he’ll ‘soon get down to the heart’, he eventually find that there is no heart or centre to the onion, ‘[j]ust a series of shells / All the way through, getting smaller and smaller!’⁴³ An idealist in collapse, ‘a fantasist with no ideals’, this scene closes with Peer’s awareness that his life is drawing to a close, ‘the game can never be played again’, and a realisation that his ideal (and idealism) has been worthless.⁴⁴

⁴¹ The quote is from p.4, Moi also mentions about the definition applying specifically to her monograph p. 68.

⁴² George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (Maryland: Wildside Press LLC, 2009), p. 61.

⁴³ Ibsen, pp. 154-155.

⁴⁴ Ibsen, p. 155. See also AS Byatt, ‘The Age of Becoming’, *Guardian*, 16 December 2006.

In terms of what Moi refers to as the metatheatrical and meta-aesthetic, Peer's self-consciousness of his theatricality is also particularly visible in the final act of the play. For Moi, this meta-aesthetic quality of Ibsen's writing is further evidence of his movement away from Romantic idealism and towards notions of early Modernism and an 'artistic hunger for something new'.⁴⁵ In *Peer Gynt*, the second scene of the fifth act sees Peer shipwrecked and in danger. Having fought the ship's cook to the death in order to cling to the keel of the wreckage (which will only support one person), he encounters a passenger who re-assures him that he 'won't die in the middle of the last act'.⁴⁶ This moment, combined with my reading of the 'onion scene', as well as the anti-Romantic tendencies articulated above, begin to build an image of a play emerging from Romantic traditions and anticipating the birth of Modernism. The possible effect on stageability of such a shift from one theatrical convention to another is the theoretical kernel of this chapter, which is concerned with the possibilities of the unstageable in *Peer Gynt* after its publication, and as its first production was prepared.

With a sense of the historical context of the play in place, it is increasingly possible to develop an impression of the kind of unstageability that can emerge in these conditions. This kind of unstageability appears as a theatrically-specific correlative to the Lyotardian notion of presenting the unrepresentable. As mentioned in the introduction, Lyotard is here referring to the idea of modern art's awareness of something non-presentable, which is 'demanding to be put into sensible form and yet overwhelms all attempts to do so'.⁴⁷ This idea of presenting the unrepresentable is at odds with the kind of unstageability to which I refer in this thesis: namely a theatrically-specific condition of Rancière's unrepresentability, which occurs in the movement between one artistic

⁴⁵ Moi, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Ibsen, p. 144.

⁴⁷ Gary Aylesworth, 'Postmodernism' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/> [accessed 15 March 2013].

regime and the next. While this chapter will continue with a survey of the kind of literature that has been particularly relevant to this exploration, and thence to a discussion of the circumstances of the publication and first production of *Peer Gynt*, including the work of the audience and the use of music in the first production, it is worth bearing in mind that this particular notion of unstageability and its emergence in the context of a shift from one artistic tradition (or regime, in the Rancièrian lexicon), will remain integral to the chapter's developing argument.

Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, and source material

The amount of literature available about *Peer Gynt*, particularly by contrast with the other two examples that will be explored in this thesis, has, as with any research, necessitated a strict process of selecting and discarding in order to use a helpful amount of material in my construction of an analysis of a small feature of this substantial play. Before I begin to discuss the principal texts that will appear alongside my own work in the pages to come, it seems worthwhile to briefly discuss the methodology of literature survey that is to be employed across this work. As set forth in my introductory chapter, the literature surveyed for each subsequent chapter will be stated within the body of the individual chapters. This is because the case studies' key material differs from the more general material examined initially in order to gauge current and past trends and tendencies surrounding the notion of stageability in my field and others in close proximity to it, as well as varying from case study to case study.

Regarding this chapter on *Peer Gynt*, and particularly the short period of the play's life before and during its first staging, which is my primary focus, it is appropriate to analyse material written at the time of these events. I will explore (in translation) letters written by Ibsen, to his publisher Frederik Hegel, to his devoted friend and supporter Bjørnsterne Bjørnson, and to Edvard Grieg, the composer of the music for the first

production of *Peer Gynt*, among others. In chronological order of appearance of the editions studied by me, John Nilsen Laurvik and Mary Morison (1905), Arne Kildal (1911), and Evert Sprinchorn (1965, but including some of Laurvik and Morison's translations) have produced volumes of Ibsen's correspondence.⁴⁸ The differences and similarities between the various translations and editions are, in the main, negligible, and of little interest to a study which does not focus on this specifically. However, some intriguing differences appear in a small number of the letters, a few of which will be explored in the main body of the chapter. More generally, these letters serve as an insight into the workings of the minds of those who wrote them, and, most importantly, at the time at which they wrote them, allowing me to freely examine the notion of unstageability in *Peer Gynt* between 1867 and 1876, its intentionality, its demands, and its subsequent denial of that description.

This work has also benefitted from others' words written across the period discussed in the chapter. The Danish writer Vilhelm Bergsøe has written a captivating description of a summer spent in Ibsen's company on the Italian island of Ischia, while the critics Georg Brandes, Edmund Gosse, and William Archer write passionately about the value of Ibsen's work at home and abroad. These documents are of significant value to the work undertaken in this chapter, as they allow me to ascertain critical response to the work in the context of the first publication, and subsequently the first production. Additionally, though only published online to date, four newspaper reviews of the first performance of *Peer Gynt* in 1876 have been translated from Norwegian into English by May-Brit Akerholt. These reviews respond to the concerns of this chapter insofar as

⁴⁸ It is also interesting to note that an additional edition of letters published in 1905 appears under Morison's name alone. While the letters appearing here are identical to those included in the version published with Laurvik, Morison's own introduction to the additional volume, with its emphasis on Ibsen's personal relationships and their illumination through the selected letters, is a notable resource not included in the joint edition.

they give a contextual view of the attitude towards what might be called stageability in *Peer Gynt* at the time, allowing me to situate a discussion of the possibilities of the unstageable alongside such primary sources. Of course, secondary material comments on and speculates about this first production, as I myself will do in this chapter in a way, but it must be noted that the opportunity to discuss firsthand reviews from members of the audience in the Christiania Theatre on 24 February 1876 invigorates and encourages my work over 130 years later. As will be examined below, the accord with which all four reviewers independently discuss what could be referred to as the previous unstageability of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* allows me to reaffirm my use of this example in my thesis as an illustration of a particular possibility of unstageability.

Turning to an examination of a selection of the secondary material available, Michael Meyer's three-volume biography of Ibsen, published in 1971, is consistently attentive to detail and generous in description to a fault.⁴⁹ While Meyer's prime goal in this text appears to have been the provision of such detail and not to assess or analyse many of the sources he has gathered together, nor to personally comment. For me, this book's value as a reference is significant, and has allowed me to underpin my theories of unstageability and thoughts on the text with contextual evidence stemming from Ibsen's life story, alongside the primary material I have consulted.⁵⁰ Similarly, Meyer's introductions to his own translations of Ibsen's work are comprehensive and rigorously referenced. The translations themselves read clearly, lyrically, and sensitively, allowing

⁴⁹ This was certainly perceived as a fault in the following reviews. James McFarlane, 'Ibsen's *Bildung*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 May 1968; Rolf Fjelde, 'Review', *New York Times*, 3 October 1971; Philip Houm, 'Parodic and Superficial in Nine Hundred Pages', *Dagbladet*, 3 December 1971.

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that most of Meyer's material comes from Halvdan Koht's 1928-9, two-volume *Life of Ibsen*, but that Meyer's strength here lies in his unerring thoroughness of reference and detail in his prose, as well as his comprehensive bibliography and index.

form and subject to complement and support each other.⁵¹ Key biographical information regarding ‘Ibsen as a human being...the man before he became a mask’ has come from Hans Heiberg’s 1969 work, *Ibsen: A Portrait of the Artist*.⁵² For me, the most interesting feature of this popular book is the way in which Heiberg uses his own historical moment (the late 1960s) in order to comment upon Ibsen’s. With frequent recourse to how Ibsen is viewed ‘now’ (his now) as a comparative device to original reception of the playtexts and productions, Heiberg leads us through Ibsen’s life with primary focus on the man and his work. Though I differ from Heiberg’s underlying claims and have a clear academic intention towards *Peer Gynt*, attempt to situate the text in its own theatrical-historical context in order to make suggestions about the possibilities of the unstageable, it is interesting to note that I am also, in a lesser way, presenting *Peer Gynt* in the light of the nine years between its composition and the first production, in order to attempt to discover why now, in the early twenty-first century, the term ‘unstageable’ continues to arise in description, review, and analysis of the play.

Apart from biographical information about Ibsen and the historical context of the time in which he was writing, I have also explored literature that specifically focuses on *Peer Gynt*. In order to examine Ibsen’s work, not only as a writer but in many other roles in theatre production, a fact which leads me to speculate about the nature of unstageability in *Peer Gynt* and Ibsen’s intention to write an ‘unstageable’ play, I will consider his level of expertise in stage management, producing, direction, and general venue

⁵¹ With this in mind, any quotations from *Peer Gynt* are taken from Meyer’s translation of 1963, published in paperback by Eyre Methuen London in 1973 (bibliographical detail in above footnotes), unless stated otherwise.

⁵² Hans Heiberg, *Ibsen: A Portrait of the Artist*, trans. by J. Tate (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), p. 9.

This popular biography makes no attempt to function as an academic text, but rather to appeal to ‘people who are interested in Ibsen’ (p. 10). In keeping with this frank claim, Heiberg does not include an index, a referencing system or bibliography, and does not allude to any particular methodology of research. Rather, he constructs a story that focuses, even in its chapter titles (which include words such as ‘struggles’, ‘defeat’, ‘inner clarity’ etc), on the emotional and artistic life of the man, and makes no major claims about any of the works.

management. This expertise is evoked in the work of Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, who, through the prism of Scandinavian theatre history, consistently return to Ibsen's role in the theatre and his awareness of the practicalities involved in mounting a theatrical production. A number of conference papers led to the composition of their chapter 'Ibsen and the Scandinavian Theatre' in Errol Durbach's collection entitled *Ibsen and the Theatre*, published in 1980. This chapter in turn was the catalyst for *Ibsen's Lively Art* in 1989, a book-length study of Ibsen's work, examining the plays in terms of their function as texts for performance, and, like their earlier work, focusing on the theatre history of Scandinavia as a context and a framework for this analysis. Finally, in 1996, Marker and Marker published *A History of Scandinavian Theatre*, a thorough and authoritative survey of the history of theatre in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, from the Middle Ages up to what they refer to as 'Postmodern theatre', referencing directors working in Scandinavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including a lengthy discussion of various productions by Ingmar Bergman and Peter Langdal. This book contains a concise and informative chapter entitled 'Ibsen's Norway', which contextualises Ibsen's emergence into the Scandinavian theatre scene in terms of the nationalistic conflicts of the time, and theatre's role in helping Norway to carve a new and distinct identity. The chapter then shifts focus, most helpfully for my own work, to examine Ibsen's career in theatre production up until the point where he left Norway, emphasising the technical and financial resources of the theatre in Bergen in which he worked, the effect this had on the staging capabilities there, and how Ibsen's writing adapted and changed constantly in order to facilitate the staging of his work.

Detailed analysis of the aspect of unstageability in *Peer Gynt* to which I will refer is something that is difficult to locate across the Ibsen studies lexicon. For example, in

John S. Chamberlain's *Ibsen: The Open Vision*, Chamberlain mentions that he is 'seeking to demonstrate something of what can be known about Ibsen's unknowableness', but this promised paradox does not materialise in the monograph.⁵³ Instead, the reader is treated to an examination of the many ways in which it is possible to interpret Ibsen's plays, allowing the sense of 'unknowableness' to refer to this ambiguity caused by plurality, and leading the reader to ponder the innate unknowability of an author or critic's intentions when reading or writing about a work of art. Similarly, in *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays* by Richard Hornby, the chapter on *Brand* (a play which was written by Ibsen immediately before *Peer Gynt* and published in 1865) and *Peer Gynt* discusses their status 'not as plays for performance but as dramatic poems'.⁵⁴ Hornby briefly mentions the difficulties faced in staging some of the more demanding scenic effects in both plays, but never analyses this in any great detail, which, it seems, is a general feature of any allusion to the idea of unstageability in Ibsen.

With this information in mind, it can be seen that there is a slight aperture in the field of Ibsen studies into which my discussion tracing a sense of the original unstageability in *Peer Gynt* might slide. None of the material I have surveyed has asked the questions that I am posing concerning the possibilities of the unstageable in relation to the play in its theatrical-historical context. Similarly, the kind of unstageability with which the play continues to be associated in the twenty-first century relates to a historical specificity, and tends to have very little to do with the unstageabilities presented in the late nineteenth century, in a post-Romanticist, pre-Modernist situation of the text and its production. Indeed, I aim to suggest that the unstageability of the play when it was

⁵³ John S. Chamberlain, *Ibsen: The Open Vision* (London: The Athlone Press Limited, 1982), p. 6.

⁵⁴ Richard Hornby, *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays* (New Jersey, London and Toronto: Associated University Presses Inc., 1981), p. 53.

written as such by Ibsen in 1867, has not endured. The consistent stagings of the play from 1876 to now, a detailed history of which obviously cannot be attempted here, reveal a playtext that has surpassed its previous unstageability. The factors associated with this relate to a number of historical and theatrical concerns. Invoking the theoretical framework articulated in the introduction to this thesis, I will suggest that a movement from Romanticism to Modernism, and the corresponding shift in Ibsen's writing as described above, presents *Peer Gynt* as a significant example of the unstageability that can emerge in such a theatrical repositioning. A further contextual exploration arises in a consideration of allusions to unstageability occurring in other Ibsen texts, a continuing indication that his work corresponds to the question of how unstageability might operate in *Peer Gynt*.

While it falls beyond the scope of this chapter to cover each of Ibsen's plays in detail regarding the notion of unstageability, it is helpful contextually to situate some of his plays briefly in this view. I do not necessarily intend to set up an artificial thread or a legacy of unstageability stretching through Ibsen's writing career, but a swift glance at some examples across his oeuvre may contribute to a sense that the staging of his works was not always as straightforward as the fact of a playwright writing predominantly for the theatre might suggest, leading on to *Peer Gynt* and the specific sort of unstageability that this example embodies.

Ibsen's first play, *Catiline*, was written in 1848. The writer was twenty years old, and in the process of completing an apprenticeship to an apothecary in the small Norwegian port town of Grimstad, about one hundred miles south of Skien, where he was born. This play was, he informed his friends, 'definitely for performance'.⁵⁵ However, it was

⁵⁵ Heiberg, p. 42

‘politely refused’ by Christiania Theatre, to whose directorial board he sent it in 1849.⁵⁶ While the grounds for this refusal are unclear from the theatre’s side, Ibsen wrote a letter to his friend Ole Schulerud on 5 January 1850 discussing the matter. In this letter, which gives a clear indication of the reasons for the response given to him by Christiania Theatre, he suggested an alternative preface for *Catiline*, a statement asserting that ‘[t]his play was originally intended for the stage, but the directorate of the theatre found it unsuitable for this purpose’.⁵⁷ It can be inferred from this that the theatre’s letter of rejection may have indicated problems with the staging of the script, leading me to suggest a certain level of assumed unstageability to be a key factor in the decision not to stage the play. While the play eventually had its world premiere at Nya teatern in Stockholm in 1881, directed by Ludwig Josephson, who by that stage was quite accustomed to the practical exploration of questions of stageability in Ibsen’s plays, Frederick Marker and Lise-Lone Marker indicate that a further, and quite similar, problem became evident. In their comprehensive survey of the history of Scandinavian theatre, they note that the thirty years between *Catiline*’s completion and its premiere led to the conclusion that, ‘this early experiment [of Ibsen’s] was no success in the theatre’.⁵⁸

From here, reasons given by critics (whether contemporary to Ibsen’s time or to my own) for a certain unstageability in Ibsen’s work vary, but tend to mention the play in the context of the time in which it was written versus its stageability in the later twentieth century. The idea of whether a play ‘worked’ or not, i.e. how well it was received by its audience, also seems to be a much-used measure of the success or

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist, 1828-1864* (London: Rupert-Hart Davis, 1967), p. 65.

⁵⁸ Marker and Marker, p. 142.

otherwise of his plays, as it continues to be in our time. For example, *Lady Inger of Østeraad*, which was written by Ibsen in 1854 while he was still at the Bergen theatre, was apparently repeated just once after its opening performance due to poor audience reception. However, Heiberg, reviewing the production history of the play in 1969, comes to the conclusion that

it seems strange that this powerful, living drama was such a flop...[i]n this century the play has been performed on a number of stages in the world and is the only one of the author's youthful works which the passing of time has not made unplayable.⁵⁹

Meyer concurs with this, remarking that *Lady Inger of Østeraad* is 'the first [of Ibsen's plays] that would stand up to performance today'.⁶⁰

Love's Comedy was published on New Year's Eve 1862, and offered for sale by its author to a theatre in the northern Norwegian town of Trondhjem (now Trondheim) just eight days later as a performance text. While this play was described by Ibsen as 'among my finest creative efforts', Meyer observes that '[a]ttempts to revive it...have never proved successful, and are never likely to...[i]t is crippled by the untheatricality of its form'.⁶¹ Heiberg agrees with his contemporary, noting that 'for theatre people of today [1969] it is rather uninteresting, as it...is so bound to its own day...that if it is performed nowadays it is only as a respectful gesture towards its author'.⁶² Noting that a sort of unstageability can be seen in much of this earlier work, it is particularly important to observe descriptions of Ibsen's 'painful progress' when beginning to write *Brand*, a play which, on its publication in 1865, 'nobody dared stage'.⁶³ Meyer suggests that this unstageability of *Brand* could represent more than Ibsen's general unease with

⁵⁹ Heiberg, p. 75.

⁶⁰ Meyer, p. 136.

⁶¹ Evert Sprinchorn, ed., *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches* (Massachusetts: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), p. 131; Meyer, p. 223.

⁶² Heiberg, p. 107

⁶³ Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry, 1864-1882* (London: Rupert-Hart Davis, 1971), p. 26

the limitations of the staging conventions of the time, hinting that, perhaps, Ibsen was questioning his status as playwright and wondering whether the medium of poetry might be better suited to his work. He further notes that Ibsen ‘was at one of those critical stages in a writer’s career when he realises, slowly and unwillingly, that he is writing in the wrong medium’.⁶⁴ This idea becomes increasingly relevant as an examination of *Peer Gynt* progresses and the question of unstageability is suggested to be an intentional endeavour on Ibsen’s part.

At this point, as a discussion opens up regarding Ibsen’s supposed aims in writing and staging, it is important to offer a sense of the problems of relying on the concept of authorial intention. Invoking authorial intention may allow the critic to thrust a firm and cogent meaning onto the process of reading and analysing a text, with such a fixity of meaning encapsulated in the figure of the author.⁶⁵ However, in the wake of theories of interpretation and intellectual developments from psychoanalysis to post-structuralism, an uncomplicated reliance on the intention of the author in relation to the meaning of the text has significantly diminished. Indeed, in the context of Ibsen’s writing of *Peer Gynt*, the Romantic notion of inspiration already related to a certain separation of the writer from the meaning of the work, suggesting that the work was produced in a moment of spontaneous creativity, stemming from an involuntary response to nature or emotion, and that the writer was thus not necessarily fully aware of the meaning of their own works.⁶⁶ Further to this, a post-structuralist deconstruction of the author in the text, following from Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’, suggests the author’s

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley indicate that ‘the intentional fallacy’ is against authorial intention, arguing that meaning should be discoverable within the text itself. William Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 1954).

⁶⁶ Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 11.

absence from the written work, and thus their intention, and advocates the production of the meaning of the text by the reader instead.

A solution to the problem of authorial intent in this case is not to solely rely on the concept of authorial intention as a methodology, but to discuss Ibsen's letters and details of his biography as an element of a theatrical-historical interpretation, rather than as the sole method of understanding the possibilities of unstageability in *Peer Gynt* as they emerge from its theatrical-historical context. For me, the complexities of Ibsen's writing of *Peer Gynt*, in the context of his life, his theatrical career, and the time in which he was writing, are intricate. The historical analysis of some of his social and professional writing of the time is, for me, a source of contextual information about the playwright and the play. However, it would be naïve to rely on it as the only source of interpretive direction for an analysis of the play in relation to unstageability. With this in mind, the utilisation of reviews from the first production of the play, as well as a range of theatrical-historical viewpoints including my own, combine to provide a detailed discussion of the play's composition and production, focusing on notions of unstageability as detailed in the thesis' introduction, and with awareness of the difficulties that would arise in the concentration of my argument on the concept of authorial intention.

A closet play, perhaps.

The connection between *Peer Gynt* and the genre of closet drama, popular with Romantic writers, suggests an interesting response to what Benjamin Bennett has referred to as 'theatre as problem', referring to the dependence upon theatrical

realisation of the dramatic text.⁶⁷ To take a few examples, *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*'s entry for closet drama sees the play briefly mentioned in this context. Martin Puchner, to whom I have referred in my introductory chapter in terms of his work on anti-theatricality, writes *Peer Gynt* into this entry as a representative example of plays with 'too many characters...too many changes of scene...too long to allow for stage representation'.⁶⁸ Concerning his use of Ibsen here, while the evidence of the many stagings of the play would seem to disagree with his comment without assistance from me, it is important to note that observations such as these illustrate one of the reasons why I may only position *Peer Gynt* as a closet drama temporarily. The play may share some characteristics with the closet drama form, but cannot remain within the genre, as the overwhelming evidence of its stageability continues to demonstrate. To return to the kind of phrasing Puchner uses, it has been represented on stage many times, with the apparently hyperbolic volumes of characters, scene changes, and time mostly intact.

Another mention of *Peer Gynt* in terms of closet drama comes from Philip Gaskell, who in *Landmarks in English Literature* refers to the play as one of the great successes of dramas 'intended to be read, not performed...immediately appreciated as [one of the] major works of Scandinavian literature (and which, incidentally, [was] later successfully produced on stage)'.⁶⁹ Gaskell, in *Landmarks in Continental European Literature*, continues with this thought, describing Goethe's *Faust* as 'a long closet

⁶⁷ Benjamin Bennett, *Theater as Problem: Modern Drama and its Place in Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990). Additionally, Shou-ren Wang's *Theatre of the Mind* specifically explores closet drama in the Romantic era, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis.

⁶⁸ Gabrielle Cody and Evert Sprinchorn, eds., *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama Volume 1* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 271.

⁶⁹ Philip Gaskell, *Landmarks in English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 105

drama comparable in form to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*'.⁷⁰ To turn to a final example, Toril Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* discusses the fact that *Peer Gynt*, 'conceived as closet drama, [has] long been in the repertoire of theatres all over the world'.⁷¹ While these authors do not linger on the definition or history of closet drama, which I will briefly do in order to contextualise *Peer Gynt*'s position within its genre, they do allow me to support an idea that the play can be considered in this light.

As explained above, Ibsen initially wrote *Peer Gynt* as a play purely for reading, a dramatic poem that was not intended for staging. This notion of writing a play not to be staged has strong links to closet drama, a genre of playwriting whose roots can be traced to the work of Ancient Greek writers such as Plato and Xenophon, who wrote many of their philosophical reflections in the form of dialogues, not for performance but for reading only. This discussion of closet drama serves an increasingly coherent purpose when examined in the context of Ibsen's attempt to write within the genre. Shou-ren Wang gives the nineteenth-century examples of Lord Byron, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas Hardy, as writers of 'unacted drama', and this is the kind of closet writing to which it seems Ibsen is most connected in the context of writing a play not specifically to be performed, allowing for a further exploration of *Peer Gynt*'s potential classification as a post-Romantic text.⁷² Indeed, Ibsen had what could be described as a brief 'closet drama period' spanning three plays, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Emperor and Galilean*, though it is interesting to note that each of these works was subsequently staged within 25 years of its composition. *Brand* was written in 1865, and was performed in Stockholm twenty years later in 1885, directed by Ludwig Josephson at the Nya teatern. *Peer Gynt*, as previously mentioned, was written in 1867, and was

⁷⁰ Gaskell, p. 64

⁷¹ Moi, p. 189

⁷² see Wang, 1990.

performed for the first time just nine years later, in February of 1876 at the Christiania Theatre. Finally, the long epic, *Emperor and Galilean*, completed in 1873, was eventually produced, albeit in an abridged form, in Leipzig Stadttheater in 1896, almost a quarter of a century after it was written.

In terms of an exploration of shared characteristics between *Peer Gynt* and closet drama, Wiebe Hogendoorn, in 'Reading on a Booke: closet drama and the study of theatre arts', assembles what he sees as some of these traits. Across the plays he has read he notices, 'a lack of action or dramatic impulse, excessive length or time span, technically unfulfillable stage directions, a super-abundance of characters or locales, and/or a weight of abstraction considered unsupportable in theatrical terms'.⁷³ Kimberly Jannarone, in her discussion of the purposeful unstageability of Alfred Jarry's *Caesar Antichrist*, similarly recognises that '[c]loset dramas allow their authors the possibility of complete abstraction, allegorization, unlimited scope, exuberant actions beyond stageability'.⁷⁴ Such features can be found in *Peer Gynt* without difficulty, and it seems that it is worth expounding on them here. As mentioned, I am discussing the genre of closet drama in order to further situate *Peer Gynt* in its post-Romantic context, as explored above. This situation, combined with its discussion as a pre-Modernist work, can provide a fruitful context for an examination of the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge in relation to the play. Indeed, while hailed as a significant stage play in modern drama, the fact that the description 'unstageable' persists is evidence of a tendency to align this play with other plays that have been written specifically not to be staged. With this in mind, though discussing elements of *Peer Gynt* that seem to

⁷³ Wiebe Hogendoorn, 'Reading on a Booke: Closet Drama and the Study of Theatre Arts' in *Essays on Drama and Theatre: Liber Amicorum Benjamin Hunnigher* (Baarn: Moussault, 1973) 50-66, 51.

⁷⁴ Kimberly Jannarone, 'Jarry's *Caesar Antichrist* and the Theatre of the Book', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 25:2 (2009), 121-136, 124.

correspond to characteristics of closet drama, consistent with Ibsen's original desire to write it purely to be read, I hope to move towards an explanation of how, in fact, the play cannot be considered solely as a closet drama.

Looking at Hogendoorn and Jannarone's work, the features of closet drama outlined above can clearly be attributed to *Peer Gynt*. To take some items from Hogendoorn's list and relate them to the play, the suggestion of 'excessive length or time span' is an obvious departure point. This characteristic above all is one that is most problematic, indicating that a very long piece of theatre, or one in which the action spans a significant portion of time, is constitutive of closet drama. With this latter characteristic in mind, it is clear that *Peer Gynt*, which follows Peer from age twenty to 'a vigorous old man with grizzled hair and beard' over the course of five acts, can be seen to fit the description as outlined by Hogendoorn. Secondly, 'a super-abundance of characters and locales' has links with a play in which the first three acts take place in various locations throughout the Norwegian countryside, before re-locating to assorted desert and coastal settings in Morocco and Egypt, and finally returning via the North Sea to Norway. Additionally, Meyer's translation includes a *Dramatis Personae* of 46 characters, which may perhaps be described as a 'super-abundance' in Hogendoorn's terms. Finally, the idea of the closet plays embracing 'technically unfulfillable stage directions' is a feature of *Peer Gynt* that, from shipwrecks to mountains to deserts, reinforced its location in the dramatic closet in the late 1860s and early 1870s. However, as will shortly be explored, this feature of closet drama, as well as the first and last items on Hogendoorn's list, engenders thought regarding the ways in which *Peer Gynt* cannot be fully seen as a closet drama if these characteristics are a measurement of suitability for the genre.

Turning to Jannarone's traits of closet drama, we can see that 'allegorization' and 'unlimited scope' apply significantly to Ibsen's play. In the introduction to his English translation of the play in 1907, William Archer refers to the fact that the play is not a complete allegory, as there are too many inconsistencies for such an allegorization to be made. Archer prefers to refer to the play as a 'phantasmagory', as a sequence of events taking place as if in a dream.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it can be noted that there are numerous possibilities for allegorical moments in *Peer Gynt*, from the enigmatic character of the Boyg, impossible to fight against, and always 'winning by doing nothing', to Peer peeling an onion and finding nothing at the core. More generally, the entire play can be seen as an allegory for Peer's search for completeness, or a projected attempt to move upwards in the direction of the morally superior position held by Solveig, as Peer sees it. Similarly, the scope of the play, in terms of both form and subject matter, is wide and deep, 'unlimited' as Jannarone's list requires. Indeed, Ibsen himself noted in a letter to Edmund Gosse in 1872 that 'it is wild and formless, written recklessly and without regard to consequences'.⁷⁶

However, it is in the characteristics laid out by Hogendoorn and Jannarone to which *Peer Gynt* does *not* conform that an interesting moment is set up, by means of which I will extract the play from closet drama, as Ibsen did, and propel it in the direction of its first production and away from the literal unstageability of closet drama. Hogendoorn's idea of the closet plays embracing 'a weight of abstraction considered unsupportable in theatrical terms' is a phrase that must be somewhat unpacked before it is possible to situate *Peer Gynt* alongside it. For me, most of the words in this phrase are dependent on specificities of definition in order to function usefully, namely 'abstraction',

⁷⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt: A Dramatic Poem, The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen Volume IV*, trans. by C. Archer and W. Archer (London: William Heinemann, 1907), p. xx

⁷⁶ Sprinchorn, p. 124

‘considered unsupportable’ and ‘theatrical’. However, regardless of this, if, in a general sense Hogendoorn seems to be referring to the level of theoretical or non-representational material in a play, this is still difficult to quantify in terms of *Peer Gynt*. Ibsen seems, at every turn, to counter that which could be ‘considered unsupportable in theatrical terms’. For example, the enigmatic and conceptual character of the Boyg, one of the more abstract elements of the play, is completely supported by the theatre form, as it appears to Peer as a voice out of the darkness. Similarly, Hogendoorn’s assertion that a typical closet drama displays ‘a lack of action or dramatic impulse’ is not a characteristic that can be attributed to *Peer Gynt* in any way. Regardless of definitions of ‘action’ or ‘dramatic impulse’, the play has a firm trajectory of action, aided hugely by the rapidly changing settings. Likewise, the play’s abundant impulse towards drama and the dramatic drives it towards the theatre stage, departing from its roots as a closet drama and moving in the direction of theatrical production. The discussion of the construction of *Peer Gynt* below contributes to the ambiguity of the play’s association with closet drama, and begins to suggest that, rather, a different kind of unstageability can be suggested in terms of aspects of the first publication and first production.

Writing *Peer Gynt*

It seems likely that Ibsen’s writing this ‘long dramatic poem’, specifically not for the stage, was due to a movement *towards* the medium of dramatic poetry, rather than a movement *away* from the theatre and performance text. For me, this corresponds to a key argument of my thesis, that the possibilities of the unstageable are emergent in certain shifts in theatrical practice, whether in terms of developments between artistic movements, or, in this case, within the career of a specific practitioner. I suggest that, in the shift between the medium of the closet drama text and the text specifically written

for theatrical production, it may be possible to uncover a sense of unstageability pertaining to *Peer Gynt*. That said, while the medium of dramatic poetry may have freed Ibsen from the restraint of constantly having to think about whether something he was writing could be staged in the theatre, this was not in a spirit of active resentment of the theatre. As I have noted, this play appears to have been written as a quasi-closet drama text, at least at the moment of its initial composition and publication. This suggestion will be supported by close reading of small sections from Ibsen's letters during the period of composition of *Peer Gynt*, and also from information available from the Danish poet Vilhelm Bergsøe, who was Ibsen's companion during the summer of 1867, when much of the crucial work on *Peer Gynt* was completed. These may be small clues as to the significance of *Peer Gynt*'s position as a post-Romantic closet drama, but the analysis of this primary material will attempt to confirm that the unstageability in the play was not due to a discontent with the theatre and its conventions in the 1860s, but rather to a desire to move into another medium, illuminating the possibilities of the unstageable arising in such movement.

Vilhelm Bergsøe stayed with the Ibsen family in Casamicciola, presumably sharing their accommodation in what is today known as 'Casa Ibsen'. As I turn to the primary source details of this summer, a certain level of presumption must be allowed for, as firsthand information about Bergsøe's time with Ibsen is not available without a knowledge of the Norwegian language. Bergsøe wrote extensively about his visit to Ischia in *Henrik Ibsen paa Ischia og "Fra Piazza del Popolo": Erindringer fra Aarene 1863-69*, which was published in Copenhagen and Christiania in 1907, the year after Ibsen's death.⁷⁷ The book has not yet been translated into English, though Meyer, using Bergsøe's own account, describes the visit in detail in his biography of Ibsen.

⁷⁷ Meyer, 1971, p. 323

According to this account, Bergsøe and Ibsen spent their afternoons ‘on long, silent walks’ together. Ibsen, having spent the mornings writing *Peer Gynt*, was presumably contemplating what had been written and what was yet to come. These thoughts occasionally found voice, the playwright ‘thinking aloud’ to his fellow poet and walking companion. Meyer, citing Bergsøe, notes that

[o]ne day, while walking with Bergsøe, Ibsen suddenly asked: “Can one put a man on the stage running around with a casting-ladle?” “Yes, why not?”...“But it will have to be a big ladle – big enough to recast human beings in.” “It’ll look rather strange,” Bergsøe ventured, to which Ibsen replied: “Yes, I think so too, but I don’t think the play’s for acting.”⁷⁸

This short exchange presents, for me, an interesting way of thinking about unstageability in *Peer Gynt*. As mentioned above, its situation in time, occurring during the writing process, gives it the status of immediacy in terms of its ability to consider the playwright’s opinion, though with the above discussion regarding authorial intent in mind. Nevertheless, the crucial point of this instance of dialogue for my purpose here is that Ibsen, from one sentence to the next, appears to think of the play in terms of performance and then to change his mind almost instantaneously. His first, ‘sudden’ question to Bergsøe, ‘Can one put a man on the stage running around with a casting-ladle?’ is indisputably concerned with thoughts of stage performance, stage management, stage design, stage construction: thoughts of staging. It seems that Ibsen, at this particular moment, could not ignore his extensive background in theatre production and his deep knowledge of the means by which the theatre worked. A writer with this extent of awareness of theatrical production could not but think logistically about the possibility of portraying a man with a ladle ‘big enough to recast human beings in’ on the stage. His query to Bergsøe, therefore, could be evidence that this foray into dramatic poetry and the writing of plays intended for reading only, was more of a difficult transition for Ibsen than the logistically difficult stage business in the

⁷⁸ Meyer, 1971, p. 65

published versions of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* in 1865 and 1867 respectively would suggest.

Continuing to analyse this fragment of conversation about the viability of presenting a human-sized casting-ladle on the stage, I note that Ibsen moves promptly to a denial of the stage and its activities for the purpose of his current work. Following on from Bergsøe's timid response to his first question, a suggestion that the aforementioned ladle might 'look rather strange'; Ibsen immediately retaliates with the critical pronouncement that the play is not 'for acting'. I use the word 'critical' here in relation to two of its meanings. Firstly, Ibsen is criticising the play, analysing the merits and faults of the work. It is not clear whether 'I don't think the play's for acting' is considered by the playwright to be a merit or a fault, but given that he was writing a play specifically not for performance, it can be suggested that he intends the comment to be a positive one. Secondly, this reflection is critical insofar as it is, for me, of decisive importance in an analysis of *Peer Gynt* as a play written by Ibsen for reading only. It is at this juncture that we see clearly the situation of the play in the realm of something approaching closet drama. In proposing an item of stage design such as the Button-Moulder's human casting ladle, and then immediately acknowledging its potential as an image specifically because of the unstageability of the play, I suggest that Ibsen is firmly accepting the conventions of his new medium, the dramatic poem, affirming *Peer Gynt*'s position at this point in time firmly in the realm of this particular kind of unstageability.

A similar attitude to the writing of *Peer Gynt* to be published rather than staged can be found in a letter written by Ibsen after its composition. Two months after the publication of the work in 1867, Ibsen wrote to Hegel that the readership should 'read

the work as a poem' and that his 'next work will probably be a play for the theatre'.⁷⁹ While it can be argued that these comments do not specifically point towards intentional unstageability in *Peer Gynt*, they certainly express the view that, at this point in time, the work was not considered by its author to be 'a play for the theatre'. This quote from Ibsen allows me to begin to think about the play outside of its established genre. Though the word 'unstageable', as will shortly be explored, continues to be used in reference to *Peer Gynt*, most often in reviews of productions seen staged by critics, the idea that this 'not for the theatre' play could perhaps be, even briefly, removed from the various classifications it inhabits, is a less frequently examined possibility. What if the play was to be related to an entire genre of dramatic work written specifically not for the theatre? In attempting to explore the reasons why *Peer Gynt* refuses to remain unstageable, as the language often used in its description would seem to prefer, it is interesting to artificially create a position for it within the genre of closet drama. While the expression 'closet drama' is never used by Ibsen in his description of *Peer Gynt* as a play to be read rather than staged, the similarities in characteristics between the play and the category are striking and deserve some further attention here, in order to articulate an additional position for the text in a post-Romantic context.

In the introduction to his translation of *Peer Gynt*, an edition published in 1963, Michael Meyer briefly deals with the notion of the intentional unstageability of the play from Ibsen's point of view. Meyer mentions that 'Ibsen had no thought, when he was writing *Peer Gynt*, that it should ever be staged'.⁸⁰ While Meyer discusses this intentional unstageability in terms of a contempt on Ibsen's part for 'the limitations of the Norwegian theatre and of the men in charge of it', it seems that Ibsen's own thoughts, both during and immediately after the writing of *Peer Gynt*, are not so

⁷⁹ Sprinchorn, p. 72

⁸⁰ Meyer, 1963, p. 19

disdainful towards the theatre.⁸¹ Interestingly, less than ten years later, Meyer seems to have begun to adjust his view slightly. He asserts in 1971, in the second volume of his three-part biography of Ibsen, that *Peer Gynt* represented a ‘rejection of the accepted limitations of stagecraft’.⁸² This comment appears to be lacking the sense of contempt for the theatre visible in the previous assertion, though the idea of ‘rejection’ still indicates a negativity towards the theatre on Ibsen’s part in his desire to write *Peer Gynt* in its original (unstageable) incarnation as published in 1867.

As I will demonstrate, the purposeful unstageability in *Peer Gynt*, despite being written with the sort of freedom only possible for Ibsen if he withdrew from the specific medium of performance text, was not due to an inordinate hostility towards the Norwegian theatre of his time. Having read a number of letters available in English translation written by Ibsen around the period of the play’s composition, it has been difficult to find anything approaching the impression of a contempt for Norwegian theatre specifically. Similarly, the available criticism dealing with the same period does not mention any disregard on Ibsen’s part for the conventions of the theatrical medium in his country of birth. On the other hand, what is frequently mentioned is Ibsen’s derision for his country’s political situation, particularly in the early 1860s. This derision stemmed mostly from the refusal of the King of Sweden and Norway (Charles XV) and the Norwegian Storting to support Denmark in the face of a Prussian / German conquest by the armies of Otto von Bismarck in late 1863. Anger at his country’s actions led to Ibsen and his family leaving Norway in April 1864 for a period of voluntary exile that lasted seventeen years, the early part of which saw him write *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*.

⁸¹ Meyer, 1963, p. 19

⁸² Meyer, 1971, p. 73

It can be surmised that Ibsen's reaction to the political situation in his country affected his writing. In Michael Egan's collection of the reviews, letters, and articles that appeared in English and American newspapers on Ibsen's work over the period of his lifetime, William Archer, the first translator of *Peer Gynt*, illuminates further Ibsen's response to his country's lack of reaction to a neighbouring country in trouble. In an article entitled, 'Ibsen in his Letters', Archer relates that these political affairs 'kept [Ibsen] in estrangement from his country'.⁸³ Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the playwright's use of subject matter, and manner of analysis through writing, were irrevocably altered, leaving the reader of the plays of this time in no doubt as to their author's opinions about his country and certain of its citizens. Archer remarks that Ibsen 'no longer took any pleasure in evoking the great past of his country...his impulse now was to hurl scorn at his degenerate countrymen through the mouth of Brand, and to embody in *Peer Gynt* their pusillanimity, their egoism'.⁸⁴

This suggestion of Archer's is perceptive, particularly when either *Brand* or *Peer Gynt* is evaluated from this anti-Norwegian point of view. However, it is not clear whether Ibsen's contempt for his country's political tactics extended to its management of its theatres, despite the idea that writing a play specifically not for performance could be seen as an anti-theatrical act in a way, differing to Jonas Barish's 'antitheatrical prejudice', but perhaps in accordance with Martin Puchner's discussion of the 'anti-theatricality' of the work of some modernist playwrights and its tendency towards suspicion of the theatre. Returning to Archer's suggestion above, it could be conjectured that the deliberate unstageability, clear in the writing of both *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, was part of a message sent by their writer to Norway and Norwegians more generally. This hypothesis is beyond the scope of my enquiry in this chapter, but it seems necessary to

⁸³ Egan, p. 426

⁸⁴ Egan, p. 426.

mention it, if only to attempt to suggest a reason for the implications, difficult to locate in either primary or secondary source material, that Ibsen was in some way feeling frustrated or limited by Norwegian theatre in particular at this time, leading him to write texts meant purely for reading as a result of this vexation.

While this is not to say that Ibsen never criticised or blamed the theatre in any way, it is possible to dismiss claims that he felt constrained by its limitations before turning to an examination of its composition as an intentionally unstageable play. To continue, a reference of the time that portrays a decidedly aggressive feeling of negativity towards the theatre is to be found in a letter written from Ibsen to Bjørnsterne Bjørnson, on 28 December 1867. In this letter, while urging Bjørnson to rethink his decision to return to work (as a producer / director) in Christiania Theatre, Ibsen discusses vehemently the notion that working in theatre while trying to write is detrimental to the writing and to the contemplation of ideas. He describes the ideas that come to the poet while he is working in the theatre without ample time to explore them in terms of ‘daily foeticide’ in Mary Morison’s translation of this letter, and ‘repeated, daily abortions’ in Evert Sprinchorn’s translation of the same phrase, warning Bjørnson that ‘[o]ther ideas may come, but the ones in between die unborn’.⁸⁵ While this extremely violent image of the creative mind disturbed certainly leaves the theatre culpable from Ibsen’s point of view, it must be noted that it is not a reaction to the limits imposed by the theatre on the stageability or unstageability of written work as such, but rather a limit imposed by practical work on creative work. It is true that thinking about the unwritten work of Ibsen due to his working in the theatre instead is a (tantalising) kind of unstageability. Ibsen, it seems from this letter, sees working in the theatre as a damaging activity for those attempting to write creatively, but on closer inspection it seems that Bjørnson is

⁸⁵ Morison, p. 150; Sprinchorn, p. 71

less concerned with the potential harm to his poetic creation, and more concerned with the practicalities of employment. For evidence of this, Ibsen's last translated letter to Bjørnson before the one in question, written on 9 and 10 December, closes with best wishes to Bjørnson's family and references in particular 'the approaching third happy event'.⁸⁶ This appears to be an allusion to the anticipated birth of a child, and so the fact that Bjørnson appears to be taking a job at Christiania Theatre by the end of 1867 can also be interpreted as a necessary undertaking of familial responsibilities.

The first production

I will now turn to an exploration of the first staging of *Peer Gynt*, in Christiania Theatre in 1876. The playwright's decision to stage his dramatic poem, less than a decade after its publication 'merely to be read', seem to suggest what Eric Bentley refers to as a certain need for staging on Ibsen's part.⁸⁷ Bentley explores this need in terms of an inability on Ibsen's part to create anything that was not for theatre production, though he does not directly invoke *Peer Gynt*. Bentley's analysis, coupled with my own examination of Ibsen's extensive knowledge of, and indeed career in, many aspects of theatre, will add weight to the central argument of this chapter, which is that *Peer Gynt* struggles with the label of 'unstageable play' after its first staging on 24 February 1876.

Of course, a lengthy gap between the writing of a play and its first staging is not a situation that is unique to *Peer Gynt*, nor is it an infrequent occurrence. With varying lengths of gaps and a myriad of reasons why plays are not staged after they are written, it is easy for an argument of this nature to lose traction if it does not constantly adhere to specifics. The specifics of this particular case revolve around the playwright's

⁸⁶ Sprinchorn, p. 70

⁸⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *Plays: Six*, trans. by Michael Meyer trans. (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 19.

decision to stage the play, having written it as an intentionally unstageable play. Additionally interesting is Ibsen's own background in mid-nineteenth century theatre production. It is possible to suggest that, in the light of the first production of *Peer Gynt*, this deep knowledge of theatre practice prevented him from writing a wholly unstageable play, as had been his initial ambition. The challenges overcome in staging the first production will be outlined below in terms of Ibsen's understanding of the theatre of his time, and this idea of an inability to stay away from the theatre, to truly embrace the unstageable, will be explored initially with regard to a paper given by Eric Bentley in 2003 at the Ibsen Society of America's tenth annual conference.⁸⁸

Bentley's paper, entitled 'The Hero as Playwright: A Talk', discusses the double life of a play, as a text to be read and as a text to be performed. He describes the experience of learning about Ibsen as having this similar dual function: seeing the plays performed and/or reading them. While fully aware of his talk's exploration of 'the old dispute: literature versus theatre', he begins to provide an alternative way of going over much-

⁸⁸ My reasons for entering into such a specific realm of criticism are that this topic is rarely explored in any detail from the angle I suggest. As noted above, there are allusions to the composition of *Peer Gynt* as a play for reading and not for staging; a number of critics mention that the play was staged some years after its publication, a not unusual feature of Ibsen's work, particularly in earlier years, as outlined above. Additionally, the interaction between Ibsen and the composer Edvard Grieg is often discussed in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration between artists. If the reader is situated in Ibsen studies, this discussion tends to conclude with the writer condemning Grieg's score and assuring the reader that the music 'over-sugars' the play, to take a mild phrase from Peter Watts' introduction to his 1966 translation of the play, or that the 'charming but incongruously rhapsodic excrescence' will be attached to the play for the remainder of its existence, to turn to something slightly stronger from Marker and Marker [Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, trans. by Peter Watts. (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1966), p. 16; Marker and Marker, p. 159]. Far from exploring Grieg's contribution to the first *Peer Gynt* production in terms of an unattractive bodily growth, we read in Robert Layton's biography of Grieg that 'an even greater part [of the play's success] was the music of Edvard Grieg' [Robert Layton, *Grieg* (London, Omnibus Press, 1998), p. 77]. Similarly, Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, in their monograph on the composer, discuss the 'purely lyrical qualities' of 'Grieg's greatest triumph' [Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: The Man and the Artist*, trans. by W. H. Halverson and L. B. Sateren (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1988), pp. 194-5].

travelled ground as he thinks through the issues surrounding this old dispute.⁸⁹ In musing over plays that are more suited to reading than to performing, he dismisses the term ‘closet drama’ as ‘mean-spirited’ and instead contemplates the notion of the closet playwright’s need for theatre. Bentley discusses the fact that the ‘poetic’ plays such as *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Emperor and Galilean* could have been written as epic poems (which, arguably, they were, at least in their original incarnations). Similarly, he infers that Ibsen’s turn to the composition of ‘realist’ plays could have equally been a turn towards the novel. The implication here is that Ibsen always chose the theatre. Indeed, Bentley goes so far as to suggest that not only did Ibsen choose the theatre, but he forsook ‘highbrow’ theatre for ‘what we call “commercial theatre”: he took up the French well-made play’.⁹⁰ While Bentley does not discuss *Peer Gynt* in detail, his general sense that Ibsen remained in thrall to the theatre medium for his entire career can certainly be extended to an examination of a particular play.

It is clear that this argument again raises the question of the validity of authorial intent, as discussed above. Interestingly, in his introduction to his translation of *Peer Gynt*, Rolf Fjelde raises the question of the writer’s suitability to the task of deliberating over whether a work should or should not be performed. Indeed, Fjelde goes so far as to say that ‘of course, an artist’s comments, vexed by all manner of personal misgivings, are of dubious worth in assessing the performability, or even the real context, of his work’.⁹¹ He goes on to compare Ibsen’s ‘personal misgivings’ regarding whether *Peer Gynt* was ‘for acting’, as discussed between himself and Bergsøe, to Romantic composer Johannes Brahms’ reaction to the writing of his own Fourth Symphony. He describes

⁸⁹ Eric Bentley, ‘The Hero as Playwright: A Talk’, *Proceedings of the 10th Ibsen Society of America Conference*, 2004, <http://www.ibsensociety.liu.edu/conferencepapers/index.html> [accessed 4 October 2010], p. 2

⁹⁰ Bentley, p. 3

⁹¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, trans. by Rolf Fjelde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 260

Brahms' attitude to the piece as dismissive, and is grateful that conductors continue to programme the piece despite the composer's seeming ambivalence. However, it seems that Ibsen's comment to Bergsøe with respect to the stageability of *Peer Gynt* was a more contemplative one, and not to do with any 'personal misgivings' about the work's 'performability'. Ibsen had already approached the idea that a play could be written not to be performed when he created *Brand*, and there is no evidence to suggest that trepidation regarding the technicalities of how *Peer Gynt* could be performed was the reason for its publication as a dramatic poem with no plans for its immediate production. This argument is strengthened when Ibsen's background in theatre production is considered. His deep knowledge of the staging conventions of his time in Denmark and Norway, and his various responsibilities in the theatres in which he worked, ranging from producing to stage managing, become increasingly interesting points as we turn to *Peer Gynt* and the notion of Ibsen writing a play not intended for performance, initially at any rate.

In 1851, at the age of 23, Ibsen took up a position at Norway's first National Theatre in Bergen, which had recently been set up by the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull. Bull had heard Ibsen speak at the Christiania University Literary Society in September 1851, and had heard some of his writing performed at a concert in Christiania in October. By November, Bull had offered Ibsen a job as 'dramatic author' in the theatre he had recently leased, but that job title barely scratched the surface of the work done by the young playwright during his six years employed by the theatre. As Michael Meyer observes,

Ibsen performed practically every task associated with theatrical production except that of acting...he directed, coached in movement and speech, designed sets and costumes, ran the business side and saw to the accounts.⁹²

⁹² Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (London: Rupert-Hart Davis: 1967a), p. 106.

All of this was in addition to writing plays for the theatre, and prologues for other plays that were performed there. However, by early 1852, after a season of failed attempts to stage plays including Calderón's *The Burgomaster of Zalamea* and Oehlenschläger's *Axel and Valborg*, the board of directors of the theatre decided that new plays and new staging methods were needed in order to invigorate the work of the National Theatre. It was agreed that Ibsen, as well as two members of the theatre's acting company, Johannes and Louise Brun, would be sent abroad in order to study the theatrical conventions and dramatic literature currently being employed in Copenhagen, Berlin, Dresden and Hamburg. Accordingly, Ibsen spent from April to July of 1853 travelling through Denmark and Germany, visiting theatres, recording theatrical practices, and gathering playtexts. Meyer records that the young Ibsen had never seen Shakespeare on the stage, and while in Copenhagen saw *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *As You Like It*, as well as plays by Holberg, Oehlenschläger, Heiberg and Mozart's *Don Juan*.⁹³ In seeing performances by actors of the highest calibre in both countries, Ibsen was able to learn about 'a new school of acting, more realistic and analytical, less inclined to the grand manner and subtler in [its] appreciation of psychological nuances'.⁹⁴ This more realistic performance style which was sweeping across Europe by the mid-nineteenth century, combined with the rise of the director and designer's roles in creating individual productions, was a revelation to the young Norwegian, and would come to be a feature of theatre practice much relied upon by the playwright in his later works.

It is impossible for this chapter to include a detailed survey of European nineteenth century theatre practice in order to further contextualise the reader regarding Ibsen's familiarity with the mechanics of theatrical production, but it is worthwhile mentioning

⁹³ see Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist, 1828-1864*, p. 113

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114

a few key points. Many major developments in illusionism were achieved throughout the nineteenth century. From the development of the box set at the beginning of the century in continental Europe, to the advent of gas stage lighting in the 1820s, to Edwin Booth's pioneering stage management techniques in New York, it is clear that the drive towards more realistic representation on the stage was occurring at all levels of theatre production.⁹⁵ When Wagner's Festspielhaus in Bayreuth opened in 1876, it included steam jets which were operated in order to create 'atmosphere' or to mask scene changes. Wagner strove to create illusion, and it is clear that his thinking was reflected across the European and North American theatre scenes, especially in the work of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. In Germany, Ibsen examined the stage machinery in the Hofoper theatre in Dresden, and scoured bookshops, museums, and galleries for information on costume and props details.⁹⁶ On his return to Bergen, his job at the theatre was re-negotiated, and the board assigned to him the post of *sceneinstruktør*. Meyer, having studied the contract drawn up by the theatre for this new role, has translated for us the details of Ibsen's duties, and it seems that they are worth quoting in full:

to be present at the theatre for as many hours each day, holidays included, as may be required for complete and painstaking instruction on the stage, that each play may be ready for public performance at the time laid down by the Board. In other words, he is, when he has found the players sufficiently prepared, to continue the instruction from the point reached at the last reading rehearsals... He may, if necessary, send the players back for further reading rehearsals. The *sceneinstruktør* shall also be responsible for (1) supervising the scenic arrangements for each play (costumes and décor included), and for the general staging (groupings, entries, exits, etc.). (2) supervising in detail each actor's gestures and mime, so that all physical expressions shall fit the words of the

⁹⁵ The development of the box set is discussed in Donald Roy and Victor Emeljanow, eds., *Romantic and Revolutionary Theatre, 1789-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 74, 243, 263. Arthur Bloom's biography of Edwin Booth, *Edwin Booth: A Biography and Performance*, discusses Booth's approach to stage management (North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), and Michael Booth's *Theatre in the Victorian Age* discusses developing methods of scene changes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 70). For a comprehensive history of theatre gas lighting, see Terence Rees, *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1978) and Frederick Penzel, *Theatre Lighting Before Electricity* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1978).

⁹⁶ Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist, 1828-1864*, p. 117

characters represented. (3) ensuring that the players play together, and indicating to each of them the role that he or she has to play in the plot as the situation changes.⁹⁷

It can be seen from this lengthy quotation that Ibsen's position at the theatre in Bergen, which he held until the summer of 1857, would have versed him exceptionally well in all manners related to theatrical production. Five years in a position of this kind, at this particular time in Norwegian theatre history would ensure, as Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker have noted, 'a keen sense of the practicalities and performance conditions of the living theatre that never left him'.⁹⁸ This, for me, allows *Peer Gynt*'s position as an unstageable play to remain under question, despite the often-knotty circumstances of its classification and history as a dramatic poem and as a playtext. Ibsen's awareness of theatrical conventions and capabilities at the time at which he was writing encourage a mounting uncertainty as to the unstageability of the published text, despite assurances from playwright and critics alike that this was the case. Although the composition of *Peer Gynt* remained a number of years in the future at this point, it seems that Ibsen's job in Bergen reflects important information about the writing of the play. It would be problematic to suggest that closet dramatists write unstageable plays due to a lack of knowledge about theatrical conventions and capabilities, and this is not my intention here. Rather, and to return to my work on *Peer Gynt* as positioned both within and without the closet drama genre, it is interesting to revisit the characteristics listed, particularly those to which the play does not conform. It is possible to suggest, considering the biographical information related above, that the atmosphere of theatrical production in which Ibsen was submerged over this formative period in his career ensured that the writing of an indisputably closet play would be very difficult, if not

⁹⁷ Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist, 1828-1864*, p. 120

⁹⁸ Marker and Marker, p. 49

impossible. To take Eric Bentley's argument further, I propose that Ibsen, on some level, wrote performance texts even when explicitly attempting not to do so.

However, and in order to elaborate on this argument, which allows me to continue along this line of questioning regarding the paradoxical interface between *Peer Gynt*'s description as unstageable and the many productions of it that have taken place, it is necessary to examine a number of elements from the journey towards the first staging of the play in February 1876, nine years after its publication as a dramatic poem. Tracing the story of the first staging of *Peer Gynt* relies heavily, as much of this chapter has done, on the primary evidence provided by letters and reviews. The close reading of words written around the time of the production, by people directly involved in the preparation, or by critics who were present at the first performance, will be supplemented and complemented by examinations of secondary material, which comment on and respond to what is known about this first production. Though the theatre review form can, in some ways, be seen as secondary material, exploring as it does the previously-seen primary material, in this case I am thinking about the reviews as a form of firsthand sources, stressing the fact that these reviewers were in the Christiania Theatre on the first night of the production, placing them in a primary position for the purposes of critique and analysis, in my opinion. However, it is through the letters sent from Ibsen to certain members of his production team that the previous unstageability of *Peer Gynt* begins to be revealed most clearly, as the many difficulties in turning the unstageable text into a stageable play become apparent. It is the aim of this section of the chapter to highlight the challenges faced in this first production by, among others, Ludwig Josephson and Edvard Grieg, the director and music composer respectively. This focus attempts to suggest the previous unstageability of *Peer Gynt* by

relating the difficult journey towards its first production, its first staging.⁹⁹ A combination of Ibsen, Grieg, and Josephson, with the help of the many performers, designers, and stagehands, as well as the watchful eye of the ever-reliable Bjørnsterne Bjørnson, Ibsen's constant supporter and champion, brought this previously unstageable play into the realm of the stageable, onto the stage of the Christiania Theatre, for the theatregoers present on the night of 24 February 1876.

It is interesting to note that the 1876 production was not the first time that the idea of putting *Peer Gynt* on the stage had been broached. In December 1870, according to Meyer, the subject was raised to Ibsen by the Christiania Theatre. Evidence for this comes from a letter written from Ibsen to his brother-in-law, Johan Thoresen, who at that time was in charge of Ibsen's financial affairs in Norway. The letter discusses the

⁹⁹ This notion of somehow 'proving' the previous unstageability of the play by an examination of the difficulties faced in staging it may seem contrived to an extent, and requires a moment of attention and explanation here. It is important to note that the significant amount of evidence stating astonishment that staging *Peer Gynt* was even a remote possibility, as will shortly be explored in terms of reviews of the production directed by Josephson, would suggest an almost scientific analysis of this kind. Thinking about the notion of staging *Peer Gynt* almost in terms of an equation, if the play had been previously, intentionally, purposefully unstageable, as we have heard from the playwright himself, as well as from its critics, then a production must be seen to remove some of this previously-held assumption of unstageability. To take this argument to its logical conclusion could suggest that each new production removes a further part of the previous unstageability to which the play had been shackled. Of course, this cannot be an exact equation. The first production makes such a significant move towards staging what was previously thought to be unstageable that subsequent productions cannot possibly be thought to tackle unstageability on the same level. Additionally, the potentially infinite number of future productions of *Peer Gynt*, added to the one thousand and twenty-eight recorded premieres that have already occurred, would create an exponential scale by which to measure the subsequent, theoretically ongoing removal of previous unstageability. If this can be imagined on a graph, with numbers of productions on an x-axis, and percentage of stageability achieved on a y-axis, it can be visualised how the first production would represent an immense leap up the y-axis, as a hugely significant percentage of stageability was achieved. Subsequently, each production following the first would creep up the y-axis in a barely perceptible movement. Further to this, changes in theatre technologies, and maybe social mores, could affect the slow ascent. This is perhaps an uninteresting methodology of 'plotting' stageability, and it does not attempt to represent any kind of formula of unstageability, if such a thing could be said to exist. However, for now, it allows me to make the point of the significance of the first production of what had previously been considered, even by the author, to be unstageable, requiring as it did a greater surge towards the realm of the stageable than would ever be necessary again.

payment terms possible from the Christiania Theatre, suggesting the net takings of the first performance as an example of a feasible option.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, this is the only mention of the offer to stage *Peer Gynt*, and plans for the production appear not to have passed this initial point. Interestingly, it is auspicious that the same theatre, in November 1873, staged the first production of Ibsen's *Love's Comedy*, which had been published on 31 December 1862. The production was directed by Ludvig Josephson, who had recently taken up directorship of the Christiania Theatre, and it was a particularly important premiere for this particular play, as *Love's Comedy* had been in rehearsal in the same theatre ten years before in early 1863. However, rumours of the play's being 'an offence against human decency' spread throughout Christiania, and, faced with a widespread public disapproval that soon spread to the board of directors of the theatre, it was decided to withdraw the production.¹⁰¹ Josephson's premiere in 1873 therefore, which 'exceeded all expectations', was testament to the director's skill, both in convincing the board of the theatre of the play's viability, and in staging a play the published version of which had previously been reviewed as 'scarcely suited to the stage'.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, though he had been at a significant geographical remove from theatre events taking place in Norway since 1864, and would continue to remain so for another eight years, it seems that the eventual success of *Love's Comedy* in performance, under Josephson's direction, caused Ibsen to begin to rethink the purposeful unstageability that had permeated *Peer Gynt* ever since the earliest stages of its conception, as outlined above. With a firm intention not to stage it, it had appeared that *Peer Gynt* was consigned to the realm of the study, to exist only as a closet drama, to be read privately

¹⁰⁰ see Meyer, 1967a, p. 346

¹⁰¹ Meyer, 1967, p. 224

¹⁰² Meyer, 1971, p. 190

and never to be performed on the stage. However, with reports of the audience's enthusiastic reception of Josephson's production of *Love's Comedy* on his mind, Ibsen began to envisage a production of *Peer Gynt*, to take place in the same theatre and under the same director. Indeed, in the introduction to his translation of the play, first published in 1963, Michael Meyer mentions that Ibsen's views on Josephson were that, after the success of *Love's Comedy*, '*Peer Gynt* might receive at the same hands a not unworthy presentation'.¹⁰³

His first undertaking in realising this project, however, was not to write to or meet with Josephson, nor to petition the board of the Christiania Theatre, but to write to the composer Edvard Grieg, a compatriot whom he had met in Rome in 1866, and had briefly corresponded with at that time. This letter deserves some analysis, as it is striking in the volume of information it gives us about the abridgement process from the published text of 1867 to the performance text for Josephson's production. Ibsen's plans to cut his text in order to make it stageable appear ruthless and almost violent, perhaps a necessarily inflexible process. Despite these plans, as will be discussed below, it seems that this process would consist of significantly more than the elimination of the text's more logistically taxing components. This fact will allow me to discuss the process of making a performance text from this previously unstageable play in terms of more than just an examination by Ibsen of the limits of the theatre, and the exclusion of technical difficulty. A chronicling of the actions towards this first production strengthens the interpretation above of *Peer Gynt* as a play written, not out of frustration with the limitations of the theatre of the time, but simply as the second step in his three-part foray into a slightly different medium. Nevertheless, however seemingly slight this difference between dramatic poem and performance text, it was to reveal itself as more

¹⁰³ Ibsen, 1987, p. 19

significant than previously realised. A year after his letter to Grieg, Ibsen wrote to Hartvig Lassen, then literary director of the Christiania Theatre, advising him that ‘it is impossible to stage *Peer Gynt* except in abridged form’, clearly indicating the difficulties faced by the transformation of the text.¹⁰⁴ The necessity for the author of the original text to begin to declare his own work as ‘abridged’, self-abridged, betrays a certain strain in the process originally referred to as ‘arranging the play’.¹⁰⁵ The journey from unstageable ‘dramatic poem’ to stageable performance text was one from which the originally published text would emerge, pruned into stageability by its implacable creator.

However, the new text of *Peer Gynt* was to have a significant aid in the form of another performative medium. Ibsen’s confidence that the use of music throughout the play would allow it to inhabit the realm of the stageable and to be performed under Josephson’s direction is evident in the letter to Grieg, sent from Dresden on 23 January 1874. The letter wastes no time in relating the business at hand, the third sentence asking the unvarnished question, ‘Will you compose the music that will be required?’.¹⁰⁶ There follows an account of Ibsen’s plans for shortening and reworking the text, as well as the ways in which he imagines Grieg’s music complementing what will remain. Ibsen notes that the first act will still appear almost completely as per the original 1867 text. However, in asking Grieg to compose music allowing the wedding scene in the first act to be ‘built up...into something more than is in the book’, shows us how much Ibsen intended to rely on music and sound in making *Peer Gynt* stageable.¹⁰⁷ In terms of the second act, Ibsen notes that the speeches in the scene with the Mountain

¹⁰⁴ Sprinchorn, p. 157

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 145

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Morison, p. 270

King are to be ‘considerably shortened’.¹⁰⁸ He makes no other mention of cuts to the script, and his suggestions for composed music are seemingly vague, describing ‘chords, in melodramatic style’ for Scene Four.¹⁰⁹ However, this direction becomes slightly more appropriate when reading in the text the scene is set ‘[a]mong the Ronde mountains’, and consists entirely of a monologue by Peer the morning after a passionate night with three Satyr girls.¹¹⁰ He mentions what appears to be a hangover, his surroundings, his plans to fly like an eagle and an image of his grandfather’s house with a dinner party taking place inside. Ibsen makes a request for ‘some kind of musical accompaniment’ for the Mountain King scene and the scene between Peer and the Boyg.¹¹¹ This vagueness perhaps begins to indicate a sense of the enormity of the task at hand, one that would come to be shared by Grieg over the two years to come as he struggled to coax Ibsen’s unstageable play into the theatre with his music.

The letter’s discussion of Act Three is wholly imprecise. It mentions no adjustments to the text, and Ibsen ‘imagine[s] that a soft accompaniment would be appropriate’ for the scene between Ibsen and Aase before the latter’s death in the fourth and final scene of the act.¹¹² However, it is in the detailed demands for the fourth act that we find Ibsen hard at work cutting the text and planning the music that should be composed. He informs Grieg that ‘[a]lmost the whole of the fourth act will be omitted in performance’.¹¹³ He suggests the replacement of much of the material in the thirteen scenes of this act, which traverses coastlines, deserts, tree groves, caravan routes, and wastelands in Morocco, Norway, and Egypt, with a ‘large-scale musical tone picture,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibsen, 1973, p. 58

¹¹¹ Sprinchorn, p. 146.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Sprinchorn, p. 146.

suggesting Peer Gynt's wandering all over the world'.¹¹⁴ While Grieg, at this point in the letter, would presumably have grasped a sense of the scale of change required by Ibsen in order to bring the published text onto the stage, a direction like this leaves the reader unsurprised at the difficulties that were to be encountered by the composer in carrying out the playwright's demands. Finally, the fifth act, 'which in performance will be called the fourth act or the epilogue', (due to the dismantling of the original fourth act), is to be similarly pared down.¹¹⁵ Ibsen mentions the elimination of the scenes in the churchyard and on the capsized boat, but asks for a general 'musical accompaniment' for the scene with the Stranger.¹¹⁶ Following this, he suggests that 'Solveig will sing', presumably at the end of Scene Five, and he intends this song to repeat at the end of the play.¹¹⁷

The final part of the letter deals with the financial side of the arrangement. Ibsen informs Grieg that he is asking Christiania Theatre for 400 specie-dollars between them for the abridging of the text and the composition of original music for the new version. This would come to be the main factor in Grieg's decision to take the job, as his own financial situation was precarious at the time. Additionally, in a closing line, he asks Grieg to 'keep the matter a secret for the present'.¹¹⁸ We can glean from this letter a certain insight into Ibsen's attitude here regarding the literal removal of unstageabilities from the 1867 text. His ruthless attitude to cutting the script about which he had been so certain of its status as a play not to be performed, chimes clearly with the arguments detailed above regarding Ibsen's 'need' for the theatre. This previously unstageable status of the play is, interestingly, touched upon by each of the reviews of the first

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Morison, p. 271

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Sprinchorn, p. 146.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 147

production that I have read. Likewise, these reviews allow me to further examine public response to the notion of staging what was previously considered to be intentionally unstageable.

Reviewing the first production

Four reviews of Josephson's production of *Peer Gynt* have been translated into English by Norwegian dramaturg, translator, and literary scholar May-Brit Akerholt. These represent four of the major newspapers in Christiania at the time: *Morgenbladet*, *Aftenbladet*, *Aftenposten*, and *Dagbladet*. Unfortunately, it has proved very difficult to discover the identities of the writers of these reviews, as they were published without by-lines in the original Norwegian newspapers. However, far from uncovering the mystery of who wrote the reviews of this first production, the principal interest in the material for my purpose here lies with the fact that each reviewer seems well-versed on *Peer Gynt*'s previous status as an unstageable play, and in a number of cases suggests that this was widely-held public knowledge.

The *Morgenbladet* review states that the Christiania theatre-going public 'had during the course of winter heard much about the different ways the theatre was employing to solve the colossal demands which the staging of this magnificent, unusual work must present'.¹¹⁹ The correspondent from *Aftenbladet* describes a significant portion of the audience as 'those who turned up to see the outcome of the risky undertaking that it was to bring such a drama to the stage'.¹²⁰ The review in *Aftenposten* is quite vocal about the challenges in bringing to the stage a play which had been written to be read, and is the

¹¹⁹ Unknown author, 'Morgenbladet', trans. by May-Brit Akerholt, *All About Henrik Ibsen*, <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11191175.0> [accessed 12 May 2013]

¹²⁰ Unknown author, 'Aftenbladet', trans. by May-Brit Akerholt, *All About Henrik Ibsen*, <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11191172.0> [accessed 12 May 2013]

most detailed in terms of the difficulties overcome, and public attitudes to the seeming unstageability of the play. The reviewer informs us that '[t]he daring experiment had thus succeeded; the project which many in advance had regarded as hopeless – to transfer this “reading drama” to the stage – had actually been solved’.¹²¹ This writer goes on to relate the widespread knowledge of *Peer Gynt*’s unstageability in its original incarnation, noting that ‘hardly anyone, including [Ibsen] himself, from the beginning had thought in terms of a scenic portrayal’.¹²² Finally, the review’s praise of Josephson is related in terms of the achievement of staging the previously unstageable, declaring that ‘[a]s far as we know, no other theatre director before Mr. Josephson has had the idea, and even less made it a reality, of bringing this drama onto the stage’.¹²³ The fourth review, from *Dagbladet*, similarly speaks for a Christiania theatre scene convinced of the previous unstageability of the play, closing the review by ‘voicing the general appreciation that someone finally has dared to realise the idea many have entertained for so long of bringing *Peer Gynt* onto the stage’.¹²⁴

These reviews provide a fascinating source of information in terms of exploring the journey made by *Peer Gynt* from unstageable dramatic poem to staged theatrical production. What is particularly interesting is the fact that none of the reviews engage with the idea that the play could still be considered unstageable. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, literature and reviews alike persist in calling the play unstageable, and indeed tend to describe each production in terms of how it deals with the unstageability of the text. However, these reviews from 1876 show clearly that,

¹²¹ Unknown author, ‘Aftenposten’, trans. by May-Brit Akerholt, *All About Henrik Ibsen*, <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11191173.0> [accessed 12 May 2013]

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Unknown author, ‘Dagbladet’, trans. by May-Brit Akerholt, *All About Henrik Ibsen*, <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11191174.0> [accessed 12 May 2013]

according to the reviewers, the challenge has been overcome and the play can no longer be considered to be unstageable. Combining this attitude to re-brand the play in reviews of the first performance with the plethora of versions, adaptations, and performances of *Peer Gynt* taking place all over the world, what has the word ‘unstageable’ come to mean when used in relation to it? This use continues unabated, despite the fact that it remains one of Ibsen’s most staged plays. The concluding part of this chapter will outline contemporary discussions of the play as ‘unstageable’ and will offer some suggestions as to what an alternative solution could mean for continuing attitudes towards the play.

Some conclusions

The statistical figures representing the numbers of premieres of *Peer Gynt* that have taken place since its first performance in 1876 may seem dry on initial viewing, but in fact yield some interesting material for our current questioning of the concept of unstageability in the play. According to the National Library of Norway’s internet database of all registered productions of Ibsen plays, *Peer Gynt* has premiered one thousand and twenty-eight times, not including individual performances of each production.¹²⁵ One thousand and twenty-eight distinct productions over one hundred and thirty-seven years since the play was first performed details an average of over seven new productions of *Peer Gynt* every year. Of course, an interpretation of this sort is often misleading. For example, during the Second World War, this average was necessarily disrupted, although twenty-one productions of the play were mounted between 1939 and 1945. However, moving away from the mathematical entanglements of the 1940s and towards the twenty-first century for a moment, it is interesting to examine the figures for 2009. *Hedda Gabler* was the most performed of Ibsen’s twenty-

¹²⁵ ‘Repertoire database’, *All About Ibsen*, <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/2953.0> [accessed 30 June 2013].

six extant plays from 2006-2008. However, in 2009, there were twenty-five new productions of both *Peer Gynt* and *Hedda Gabler* performed over the course of the year.

These figures should dispel any ambiguities regarding the stageability of *Peer Gynt*. Its ability to be staged, to function as a performance text, to be performed (often) in a theatre, (hopefully) for an audience, cannot be denied here. So, with this mass of evidence in place, why does the tag persist? Why is *Peer Gynt* still referred to as ‘unstageable’? There are a number of methods of approach to this somewhat paradoxical research problem. For example, an interesting way of further exploring the usefulness of the four 1876 reviews discussed above in relation to the continuing unstageability of the play, is to take four reviews from the most recent high-profile UK production of *Peer Gynt*, the National Theatre of Scotland’s production of Colin Teevan’s 2007 translation of the play. The production premiered at the Dundee Rep in 2007, and toured the UK in 2008 and 2009, where I saw it at the Barbican Centre, London, in May 2009. While the 1876 reviews, as mentioned, take seriously the notion that the unstageability of the play can no longer be seen as a key feature, four reviews from the National Theatre of Scotland’s production continue to mention the unstageability of the play, over one hundred and thirty years after the first performance.

The Scottish national newspaper, *The Scotsman*, published a review of the show on 23 May 2009, incorporating an interview with the director, Dominic Hill. Reviewer Susan Mansfield marks the production as ‘a remarkable achievement for a play which has frequently been labelled unstageable’, though she does not question why this might be.¹²⁶ Similarly, Hill mentions in the course of the interview that, in directing Teevan’s translation of Ibsen’s play, the production team were aiming to ‘set out to find a way to

¹²⁶ Susan Mansfield, ‘Ibsen’s play for today’, *The Scotsman*, 23 May 2009.

make it work, to stage it'.¹²⁷ Finally, quoting Gerry Mulgrew, who played the role of Peer Gynt in the National Theatre of Scotland, Mansfield notes that '[t]he "unstageable" tag is something of a gauntlet'.¹²⁸ To take another example, Hill had, prior to this interview, won Best Director at the Critics Awards for Theatre in Scotland. The review of the play written for this award informs us that '*Peer Gynt* is famously the unstageable play', and describes Hill's prowess in terms of his ability to overcome this unstageability, 'to find a way through the difficulties'.¹²⁹ Thirdly, the independent arts review website, *OnstageScotland*, which has been in operation since 2006, discusses the play in September 2007, shortly after its premiere. Michael Cox reviews 'a co-production [between Dundee Rep and] the National Theatre of Scotland of Henrik Ibsen's unstageable epic poem'.¹³⁰ Finally, *musicOMH*, the UK-based review website launched by Michael Hubbard in 1999, reviews the play at the Barbican Centre, where I saw it. Neil Dowden writes in May 2009 about '[t]his radical reinterpretation of a poetic masterpiece often deemed unstageable'.¹³¹

The reviews of the National Theatre of Scotland's production mentioned here have been chosen for their specific use of the word 'unstageable' in relation to *Peer Gynt*, the clearer to present my argument about the still-present description of the play as such. These reviews of the production discuss Ibsen's text as difficult or impossible to stage, and the success of the production seems often to be measured in terms of its abilities to triumph over the unstageabilities to be found in the play. While this was certainly the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ '2007-08 Winners', *Critics Awards for Theatre in Scotland* <http://www.criticsawards.theatrescotland.com/Winners/07-08.html> [accessed 18 August 2010].

¹³⁰ Michael Cox, 'Peer Gynt', *OnstageScotland*, <http://www.onstagescotland.co.uk/reviews/peergynt1/> [accessed 18 August 2010].

¹³¹ Neil Dowden, 'Peer Gynt', *MusicOMH*, http://www.musicomh.com/theatre/lon_peer-gynt_0509.htm [accessed 18 August 2010].

crucial issue at hand in the preparations for the premiere of *Peer Gynt* in 1876, it cannot be denied that the same argument begins to sound repetitive and uninteresting when applied to a production taking place in the twenty-first century. The steady accumulation of new theatre technologies lends an increasing irrelevance to the idea of what is unstageable logistically. I do not deny the financial and economic unstageability imposed upon many theatre practitioners, not only recently but throughout past centuries of theatre and performance, but I must acknowledge Alison Findlay, Gweno Williams, and Stephanie J. Hodgson-Wright when they argue that ‘unaffordable does not mean unperformable’.¹³²

In essence, this thesis’ emphasis on the articulation of moments of unstageability in particular theatrical-historical contexts, often indicative of specific shifts in theatrical practice, leads to the conclusion that such language used in recent reviews of this twenty-first century production of *Peer Gynt*, do not present the understanding of unstageability that I aim to explore. For me, this is further evidence of the reliance of the possibilities of the unstageable on context, and suggests a historical fluctuation in understandings of the term. In the introduction to this chapter, I indicated that the specific theatrical-historical positioning of *Peer Gynt* could suggest a condition under which the possibilities of the unstageable could be said to emerge. Throughout the chapter, I have been attempting to suggest that this notion of unstageability could relate to a certain shift in artistic form towards the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in terms of the movement from the ends of Romanticism towards the development of Modernism. The discussions above have encompassed reviews of the published and produced versions of the play; letters from and to Ibsen regarding the play’s

¹³² Findlay, A., Williams, G., and Hodgson-Wright, S. J. (1999) “‘The play is ready to be acted’: women and dramatic production 1570-1670’, *Women’s Writing*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 129-148, 148 n. 21.

construction and preparation; historical, theoretical and theatrical dealing with a range of notions circling round what might be difficult or impossible to stage. I have also attempted to analyse the relationship between Ibsen's playtext and closet drama as a particular way of thinking about the play's context in terms of Romantic writing. For me, all of this material contributes to a articulation of the context of this post-Romanticist, pre-Modernist play, and examines the kind of unstageability that arises in such a shift from one artistic movement to another one.

Turning towards the second case study, which will focus on the decline of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the 1950s and 1960s, allows for a historicisation of an aspect of the development of European theatre between the two case studies. The blooming of a variety of Modernist theatrical practices from the very end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, encourages the evolution of a key theoretical idea of this thesis, namely the idea that the kind of unstageability to which I will refer can be seen as operating in parallel to a particular kind of unrepresentability in twentieth century theatre. I have discussed this in the thesis introduction in relation to a counterpart of the Lyotardian sense of representing the unrepresentable, or representing that there is an unrepresentable. One example of an articulation of this idea can be seen in the early twentieth century in the practices of the Dadaists. This brief artistic movement opposed both conventional notions of bourgeois art, and the violent upheaval of World War I in Europe, with a confrontational, 'anti-art' approach, embracing chaos, fragmentation and nonsense. In doubting the ability of art to represent the tumultuous reality in which they found themselves, the Dada artists explored such unrepresentability by creating improvisational performances, poems based on nonsense languages and stream-of

consciousness, and visual art pieces from ‘readymade’ and found objects.¹³³ This notion of representing the unrepresentable, or representing that there is an unrepresentable, can also be seen in the work of playwrights such as Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, both of whom investigated (among other things) the notion that places where theatrical meaning is traditionally to be found (the text, the body of the actor) can be stripped of their conventional roles, and that ‘meaningless’ words and actions can be situated in their places.¹³⁴

Historicising this particular avenue between Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* and the demise of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, albeit in a very brief and selective way, allows for a continuation of the thesis’ argument about the unstageable’s emergence in the twentieth century in a manner contemporaneous with the kind of representation of unrepresentability to which I have just referred. By this I mean, the examples given above provide an interesting contextual departure point for the beginning of a chapter on the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, because one of its chief concerns was, as Claude Schumacher has noted, ‘meticulous attention to realism of detail in staging’.¹³⁵ This theatre, dedicated to an extreme version of the theatrical realism that its founder had previously explored at the Théâtre Libre while writing ‘ultra-naturalistic plays’ for André Antoine’s theatre, began to founder in the wake of The Second World War, arguably for that very reason. While the Dadaists, as shown above, looked at the chaotic, uncertain, violent reality of ‘a Europe tearing itself apart’ and sought to form their own social and cultural structures in order to represent what seemed

¹³³ See Emmanuelle de L’Écotais, *The Dada Spirit* (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2002); Michael Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹³⁴ See ‘The absurdity of the Absurd’ in Martin Esslin, ed., *Absurd Drama* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 19-28 and David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 80-86.

¹³⁵ Claude Schumacher, *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 65.

unrepresentable, the Grand-Guignol's grim attempts after The Second World War to continue as it had always been can be seen as significantly contributory to its demise, and to the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable in this particular context.¹³⁶ Thus, I continue to suggest the development of moments of unstageability in the twentieth century as indicative of certain historical, political, theatrical shifts, and also in relation to performances of unrepresentability in contrasting contemporaneous theatrical examples. Indeed, it begins to seem that the inability of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol to embrace particular twentieth century shifts that may have prompted a consideration of its unstageability in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹³⁶ De L'Écotais, p. 6

Chapter Two: The Théâtre du Grand-Guignol

A way of thinking about theatrical Modernism as a set of three distinct ‘generations’ has been suggested by Bruce McConachie in recent work. Here, McConachie ventures that Modernism in theatre is divisible into ‘roughly 30-year intervals: 1880-1910, 1910-1940, and 1940-1970’.¹ In discussing the challenges presented in an attempt to historically classify twentieth century theatre, particularly in terms of the often-inextricable relationship between Modernism and the avant-garde, he notes that, while ‘historical writing depends on clearly defined categories...history is always messier than any system of categories can contain’.² While McConachie’s thirty-year phases of Modernism do not specifically align with this thesis’ movement through aspects of twentieth century theatre in an exploration of the possibilities of the unstageable, a tripartite model of Modernism is helpful as an additional way of braiding the thesis case studies together. As I have mentioned already in this thesis, the kind of unstageability to which I refer across this work seems to be particularly relevant to the twentieth century, as well as to the evolution of Modernism. Challenging the Romantic theatre of the nineteenth century, and the realist theatre to which his later work subscribed, examining Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* in terms of Modernism allows me to think about the play’s unstageability as it arises from a post-Romantic, pre-Modernist mode. In the third chapter, some of the recent work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio will be articulated partially in terms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries’ concerns with a post-Holocaust way of thinking about a survival of art, allowing the possibilities of the unstageable to emerge in a contrasting way to the first two chapters.

¹ Bruce McConachie, ‘Modernism in Drama and Performance’ in Philip Zarilli and others, eds., *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2010), 388-424, 388.

² McConachie, p. 389.

With this in mind, and building on the previous chapter's examination of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* as encountering a particular kind of unstageability, contingent on the play's publication and premiere as situated in their historical and theatrical-historical context, and emerging in its location on the cusp of Modernism and in the wake of Romanticism, I aim in this second chapter to discuss the demise of the Parisian Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in distinct, though convergent terms. Looking at the late phase of the Grand-Guignol in terms of the aftermath of the Second World War in Paris, and examining the frequently-asserted reasons for its decline, I will attempt to articulate the notion that the contextual situation of the Grand-Guignol, too, approaches a moment of crisis in a movement from one set of artistic practices to another. My theatrical-historical reference point is the idea of the modernist theatre's questioning of the representational nature of naturalist and realist theatre, the kind of anti-theatricality to which Martin Puchner refers. Indeed, in the case of this example, it can be argued that the trauma of the Second World War works on the Grand-Guignol in one way; that the consistent rise of horror cinema appears as an additional contextual factor for the theatre; and that the modernist interrogation of the theatre form presents a third influence. These three contextual circumstances combine at the time of the demise of the Grand-Guignol in a manner that allows me to discuss the theatre form's unstageability as a possibility that emerges from its situation within a distinct historical moment. Additionally, as with the previous chapter on *Peer Gynt*, the later stages of this chapter will briefly examine a twenty-first century Grand-Guignol production, in order to explore the possibilities of the unstageable as they might emerge in another context.

Introducing the Grand-Guignol.

However, before the central discussion of the kind of unstageability that may arise in a contextual consideration of the demise of the Grand-Guignol, this chapter will introduce

the kind of work that was done by this Parisian theatre in the twentieth century. Before an analysis of the historical and theatrical context of the form is examined, the following section will encompass a sense of the history, style, structure and audience of the Grand-Guignol's work, the better to illuminate the ways in which its decline in the 1950s and 1960s can be said to pertain to a certain sense of unstageability. I will also aim to reflect on the extent to which the Grand-Guignol, in contrast perhaps to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, remains on the borders of academic discourse about French theatre of its own historical moment. Possibly due to the relative obscurity of the theatre, or the popular-entertainment nature of the form, few contemporary theatre scholars have explored the Grand-Guignol in detail.³ However, my engagement with a range of sources has enabled a line of discussion that will attempt to highlight the ways in which the historical-theatrical context of the demise of the Grand-Guignol encourages a discussion of the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable.

In terms of the theatre history of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Grand-Guignol occupies an interesting position, largely due to the many significant theatre and performance events occurring over the period of its establishment. For example, the geographical situation of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the same city as the Théâtre Libre is noteworthy for the purpose of this chapter. Looking at the Grand-Guignol's own historical context as a performance style necessitates an examination of

³ That said, the relative obscurity of the Grand-Guignol is not a simple justification for its relative absence from scholarship. To refer to the other examples used in this thesis, *Peer Gynt* is only one of twenty-six plays written by Ibsen during the nineteenth century, and the ongoing work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio is critically and academically acclaimed in the twenty-first century, with little idea of how the work might be historicised in the decades following its demise. Of course, there has been a significant body of work written about *Peer Gynt*, and the critical writing on Societas Raffaello Sanzio's twenty-first century work continues to gather pace and volume. However, it can still be acknowledged that in other contexts, it would be possible to see these examples as relatively minor ones, and this can be seen as a point of contact with the Grand-Guignol's current position in theatre history studies. In terms of the Grand-Guignol's status as a popular entertainment form, this is not a justification either. Popular entertainment forms such as Eurovision and reality television continue to be analysed by theatre and performance studies scholars.

one of the major theatrical trends present at the moment of its inception, a trend that was to become ‘the basis for mainstream plays and performance throughout the modern period, and...still the dominant theatrical form today’.⁴ With the rise of Realism and subsequently Naturalism in the theatre towards the end of the nineteenth century, spectators in theatres across Europe began to bear witness to a theatre that advocated ‘an objective portrayal of daily life that appears true to the spectator’s...actual experience’.⁵ As actor-training methods intensified, and the figure of the theatre director began to assume a significantly larger role in the rehearsal and performance of plays, what had been the accepted style of theatre began to shift and change. The exaggerated gestures and overblown actions of Romantic drama were replaced with an increasing focus on details from everyday life and ‘ordinary’ people as dramatic protagonists, i.e. conditions, settings, and characters with which the spectators could identify.⁶ This new sense of subject matter and performance style was explored across continental Europe, notably at the Théâtre Libre, founded by André Antoine in 1887 in Paris, which contributed extensively to the development of theatrical Naturalism until its disintegration in 1893. Antoine himself succinctly sums up the main characteristics of the Naturalism he attempted to convey to spectators, asserting how his theatre attempted to transport real-life surroundings onto the stage that would create a recognizable and accurately reproduced environment, as a literal embodiment for the deterministic effect of environment on character.⁷

During its brief, yet significantly influential lifetime, the Théâtre Libre played host to numerous plays by a wide variety of playwrights, one of whom was the former police

⁴ Christopher Innes, *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶ Claude Schumacher, *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre 1850-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 193.

⁷ Innes, p. 13.

secretary Oscar Méténier. After the closure of the Théâtre Libre, Méténier continued his exploration of stage Naturalism, combining this with his preferred writing style, short plays known as *comedies rosses*. These plays ‘looked at the lives and language of the Parisian underclass’, using mainly working-class characters and often drawing inspiration from the *fait divers* in the Parisian newspapers, sensationalist news stories which reported on particularly gory or vitriolic murders.⁸ For example, *Lui!*, an 1897 Méténier creation which would become one of the most influential plays for the Grand-Guignol form, is set in a brothel and features an extended scene between a prostitute, Violette, and a murderer, Luc, where he describes the finer points of his ‘profession’ to her: ‘[s]litting a throat...it’s like peaches and cream’.⁹ Méténier’s purchase of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol from the publisher Maurice Magnier in 1897 provided an ideal forum for showcasing plays such as *Lui!*, which was performed there in November of that year. This was the beginning of Grand-Guignol, a combination of gory subject matter with staging techniques which drew on the sort of Naturalism seen at the Théâtre Libre.

The theatre form, while never really succeeding outside of the theatre building that bore its name, endured throughout the early part of the twentieth century until the closing of its doors in November 1962, although critics agree that its so-called ‘golden age’ took place in the 1920s, with a definite period of decline occurring in the post-Second World War period.¹⁰ Méténier passed ownership of the theatre to Max Maurey after only two years as its director. The following sixteen years would see the Grand-Guignol, under Maurey, continuing to develop the narrative and stylistic hallmarks initiated by Méténier, leading to the establishment of a unique performance style and aesthetic that

⁸ Richard Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 3.

⁹ Méténier, cited in Hand and Wilson, p. 90

¹⁰ Hand and Wilson, p. 16

would ensure the name Grand-Guignol became (and remained) synonymous with ‘theatre of horror’. Maurey, retaining both the naturalistic staging advocated by Méténier and the gritty *fait divers* material of the *comedies rosses*, proceeded to take Grand-Guignol even further in the same direction, increasing the emphasis on violence and eroticism in the subject matter, and representing scenes of both of these elements with minute attention to naturalistic detail. And in case this should become predictable or boring either to first-time spectators or indeed the *guignoleurs*, the regular attendees at the theatre, the structure of an evening at the Grand-Guignol was another essential feature of its power. This structure became known as *la douche écossaise*, meaning that dramatic pieces alternated with comedies throughout the performance, creating a ‘hot and cold shower’ effect.¹¹

The Grand-Guignol, so called after the theatre building of the same name, the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol on the cité Chaptal, an alley off the rue Chaptal in Montmartre, Paris. The literal translation of the theatre’s name is ‘Theatre of the big puppet’, which becomes increasingly appropriate as the demands made upon the actors working on its stage become more apparent. Issues surrounding availability of published material on the form (especially in English) will be discussed below, and with this in mind, an initial definition of Grand-Guignol comes from the most authoritative online resource dealing with the form. The Thrillpeddlers website, as mentioned above, provides a methodical description and discussion of the form, subdividing the material into sections dealing with history, plays, posters, movies, video, books and articles. According to Thrillpeddlers, ‘Grand-Guignol...deals with macabre subject matter and features “over-the-top” graphic violence’.¹² The potential for generalisation when using

¹¹ Hand and Wilson, p. 6

¹² ‘Thrillpeddlers’ GrandGuignol.com’, *GrandGuignol.com* <http://www.grandguignol.com> [accessed 8 April 2013].

terms such as ‘graphic’ in order to describe stagecraft will be dealt with in greater detail as the chapter moves towards a fuller discussion of Grand-Guignol.

The inaugural programme on 13 April 1897 consisted of a prologue and seven short plays, including three by Méténier himself: his adaptation of Guy de Maupassant’s story about life in a brothel during the Franco-Prussian war, *Mademoiselle Fifi* (that had originally played at the Théâtre Libre); his dramatizations of two of his short stories, *La Brême* (*Meat-Ticket*); and *Le Loupilot* (*Little Bugger*). On the same night a one-act comedy appeared, *Coup de Fusil* (*Gun Shot*), by the humourist Georges Courteline. Méténier’s expertise in Parisian crime and the underworld continued to orient the Grand-Guignol toward the violent and macabre *fait divers*. A special formula gradually evolved for the realistic staging of bloodcurdling situations with sudden, unexpected endings that would (hopefully) arouse intense emotions of horror in the spectators. Méténier’s *Lui!*, as described above, points clearly to the kind of style that would become the trademark of the Grand-Guignol.

Features of style

Turning to an examination of some more specific features of the performance style, the notion that a theatre consumed with creating extremely naturalistic, shocking representations of bodily death and destruction could also be one in which subtlety and restraint play a significant role, is perhaps an incongruous one. However, Hand and Wilson mention that the effectiveness of certain moments of extreme naturalistic representation was due to the skilful incorporation of the technical effects *into* the piece, as distinct from emphasising them. Gordon describes the often-forgotten humour inherent even in the darkest and goriest dramatic pieces of Grand-Guignol, alluding to

‘the black and antinomian humour’ of the graphic representation on the stage, as well as the balance between ‘laughter...followed by panic and, after that, by more laughter still’¹³. Indeed, Deák’s article also reminds us that ‘subtle psychological terror’ was as important to the Grand-Guignol as the blood and guts with which it made its name.¹⁴ Finally, Paulo Biscaia Filho, the director of contemporary Brazilian theatre company Vigor Mortis, uses elements of the Grand-Guignol style in his pieces about modern-day serial killers, and discusses in Hand and Wilson’s book how the company are influenced by the dramatic structure of the Grand-Guignol playscripts and, despite realising that elements of the language and style ‘would not work for a 1990s audience’, often utilise them ‘for a basis. We use them in an almost mathematical way, for its control of the audience attention is outstanding’.¹⁵

Hand and Wilson, who have set up a Grand-Guignol laboratory at the University of Glamorgan in order to study its performative aspects, discuss Biscaia Filho’s sentiments in terms of a positive rehabilitation of the form, engaging with the way in which the latter’s company make use of an archive of old Grand-Guignol scripts in order to harness qualities that they understand as very relevant to their theatre-making in the twenty-first century. While they disagree with a previous comment he makes regarding the fact that certain components of the old plays have been rendered ineffective by time, they appreciate his sense that ‘the manipulation of pace and suspense developed in the Grand-Guignol has a timeless effectiveness’.¹⁶ It seems that Deák also agrees with this notion, as he quotes the great Grand-Guignol playwright André de Lorde, who,

¹³ Mel Gordon, *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror* (New York: Amok Press, 1988), p. 3.

¹⁴ Frantisek Deák, ‘Théâtre du Grand Guignol’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 18:1 (1974), 34-43, 38.

¹⁵ Hand and Wilson, p. 48.

¹⁶ Ibid.

according to Gordon, ‘wrote over one hundred plays of fear and horror’ between 1901 and 1926.¹⁷ De Lorde asserts that

the author should strive to create an atmosphere, an ambience, to suggest to the audience, little-by-little, that something dreadful is going to happen. Murder, suicide and torment seen on the stage are less frightening than the anticipation of that torture, suicide, or murder.¹⁸

The qualities of control, restraint, and the building of suspense, all evident in the writing of the Grand-Guignol plays, are considered to be even more applicable to my purpose here when examining them in the context of the elements of the style that are still stageable today. Indeed, in another framework it could be shown how these qualities can and should characterise good writing for the stage in a more general way. However, in terms of an examination of the ways in which the Grand-Guignol style could possibly be used in contemporary theatre and performance, it is interesting to turn to a very recent example that attempted to harness the style for a 2009 audience. It is noteworthy that the discomfort of academics and critics in discussing Grand-Guignol, as pointed out by some of the English-language commentaries on the work that I have mentioned, seems to be one element of the style that has successfully transcended any potential temporal boundaries: reviews of The Sticking Place’s *Terror 2009: Theatre of Horror and Grand-Guignol* season at Southwark Playhouse, which included an evening of Grand-Guignol performances, are few and far between.

Technical aspects and acting style

A discussion of technical effects at the Grand-Guignol is critical to this chapter’s premise, as the theatre’s reputation for the display of graphically realistic horror theatre was, in the first half of the twentieth century, a key aspect of both its popularity and its

¹⁷ Gordon, p. 21

¹⁸ Deák, p. 36

decline. Indeed, in John Callahan's discussion of the form in a chapter in *Themes in Drama*, he notes the primary function of these effects, specifically that 'terror [was] incited through the tricks of stage violence'.¹⁹ Hand and Wilson dedicate a chapter to the technical aspects of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, and Gordon does likewise, emphasising the trickery of these stage techniques in his discussion. Similarly, Deák examines the details of some of the Grand-Guignol's most used effects, particularly the different techniques of blood-letting following stab wounds or gunshots to the body.²⁰ These techniques, as well as the theatre's recipe for fake blood, were highly developed, and 'jealously guarded property'.²¹ Regarding the latter, Gordon notes that the 'single most celebrated secret involved patented blood recipes', and an article in *TIME Magazine* states that '[t]he blood really curdled. It came in nine shades, and was mixed daily by Director [Charles] Nonon [the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol's last director]'.²²

However, the technical effects at the Grand-Guignol were not limited to those produced by bloody attacks of violence. For example, Deák thoroughly investigates the manner in which the head of a guillotined body appeared re-animated on stage, a stage trick originating in the work of magic illusions, where sleight of hand and audience distraction contributed to the effect.²³ Indeed, Deák connects this emphasis on tricks and illusion with the developing nature of the playtexts at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol during the twentieth century. As these texts began to stress the supernatural and fantastical rather than the violent and bloody, the increase in tricks developed accordingly. For him, '[t]he tricks used in the Grand-Guignol productions were

¹⁹ John Callahan, 'Ultimate in Theatre Violence', *Violence in Drama*, ed. by J. Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 165.

²⁰ Deák, pp. 40-1

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40

²² Gordon, p. 44; Unknown author, 'Theater Abroad: Outdone by Reality', *TIME Magazine*, 16 January 1962.

²³ Deák, pp. 41-2

traditional secrets of the theatre' and the simplicity of designs such as a dagger with a retractable blade and stage blood in the handle were complemented with far more intricate and elaborate compositions.²⁴ This complexity is also noted by Callahan, who describes the amputation of a victim's arm, which required a high level of technical preparation and accuracy from both the actor and the technical team:

This trick was accomplished by the woman pushing her arm down hard on a slat of the table made to roll over when pushed, the reverse side having been prepared with a fake arm dressed to match the actress's arm at the shoulder. At the moment the slat rolls over, the actor crosses in front of her to keep the audience from seeing the manoeuvre. He then proceeds to dissect the fake arm, with much blood coming from the handle of the cutting instrument, being squeezed out through the blade.²⁵

Callahan's quote suggests an important aspect of the Grand-Guignol's technical effects that reached beyond the objects (and fluids) designed for the purpose. The logistical achievements of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol also presented a challenge to its actors, and the theatre's acting style developed accordingly. The interface between the Naturalism drawn from the Théâtre Libre, and the complex demands of the theatre's technical effects, required an extensive range of techniques from the actors involved. As Hand and Wilson note, '[m]any of the stage effects were utterly dependent upon the specialist skills of the performance for their successful execution'.²⁶ Indeed, Deák refers to the actors' 'double role', busy not only with the more conventional demands of a script and a character, but also with the requirements peculiar to the Grand-Guignol actor.²⁷ Deák suggests that the aspects of this double role were interdependent, though their origins can be traced to quite different styles of performance. The *faits divers* Naturalism inherent in the scripts written for the actors, following from the Théâtre Libre's influence, relied on a similarly naturalistic method of approach in terms of

²⁴ Deák, p. 40

²⁵ Callahan, pp. 172-3

²⁶ Hand and Wilson, p. 55

²⁷ Deák, p. 42

acting style. However, ‘the expressions of horror, in the situations of torture, madness, and violent death, [for which the] actors had to be able to produce a rather difficult scale of expressions and sounds’, seem to derive from a more melodramatic style of acting, attributed by Deák to ‘the acting manners of early silent films’, though it must be noted that he bases this analysis on pictorial evidence of Grand-Guignol pieces, which could, potentially, be more melodramatic in their representation.²⁸ Hand and Wilson, in their laboratory at Glamorgan, corroborate Deák’s analysis with their performative findings, namely that ‘[t]he Grand-Guignol is a form that seems to break away from conventional naturalism as often as it embraces it’.²⁹

As I mentioned above, an outline of these elements of acting style and technical effects is relevant to this chapter’s suggestion that the decline of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the mid-twentieth century could point to the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable. As I noted in the conclusion to the previous chapter, this sense of unstageability in theatres of realism can be seen in parallel to contemporaneous theatrical work examining notions of unrepresentability. Additionally, following from the introduction’s theoretical discussion, the notion put forward by Rancière in relation to conditions of unrepresentability emerging in what could be called a ‘regime shift’, can be explored in terms of the Grand-Guignol’s particular context, both in terms of theatre practice and historical events. Some of the arguments surrounding the demise of the Grand-Guignol in France will be analysed below, and some conclusions will be drawn as to the connections between these arguments and the emergence of a sense of the unstageability of the form, additionally supported by an analysis of the reception of a revival of the Grand-Guignol performance style in London in 2009. Conversely, it will also be tentatively suggested that the extreme adherence of the Grand-Guignol to a

²⁸ Deák, p. 42

²⁹ Hand and Wilson, p. 35

form of theatrical realism, as described above, contributed to its decline, but has perhaps become an obstacle to its re-staging in the twenty-first century.

Spectators

A consideration of the audience's reactions is a feature of much of the writing on the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. Of course, this is a statement that can be applied to almost any performance style, theatre form or moment in theatre history. Indeed, it can be argued that much of twentieth and twenty-first century theatre is predicated on the idea, articulated here by Peter Brook, that '[a] man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged'.³⁰ However, this link between performer and spectator, apparently so necessary to theatre, is often an implicitly acknowledged one, and it seems that, in the case of the Grand-Guignol, the relationship between the two is more visible, and more central to the theatre's story. It is also a significant part of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol's demise (and subsequent unstageability) in the second half of the twentieth century. The reasons for the demise of the theatre and its eventual unstageability, attributed mainly to a combination of the onset of the Second World War, and the rise of horror cinema, relate directly to audience preferences, tastes, and mores. The work of the audience in its particular socio-historical context is thus absolutely relevant to this study, and will be returned to below.

However, despite the shocking subject matter and graphic violence on display at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, it is important to note, as Deák has discussed, that the productions would certainly have shocked, but not affronted audience members. Deák mentions that 'the horrors of Grand-Guignol were well within the accepted norms of

³⁰ Brook, 1968, p. 1

society', but goes on to refer to the manner in which Parisian audience sensibilities in the mid-twentieth century were almost amusingly specific.³¹ For example, he notes that 'the victims in Grand-Guignol productions were tortured and killed in many brutal and refined ways, but the French public and the authorities could not tolerate seeing someone guillotined on stage'.³² The position that the guillotine holds in French history engenders this reaction, an interesting phenomenon in the midst of a theatre form brimful of representations of violence and murder. Indeed, reactions to the violence and horror of Grand-Guignol productions were varied. They ranged from fainting to ironic amusement. For some spectators, the suggestive style of Grand-Guignol provoked a genuine reaction. For example, in a presentation of a surgical operation on stage, some spectators smelled ether, which (of course) was not used.³³ In reaction to the realistically staged blood transfusion, some spectators vomited or even fainted. However, the productions of Grand-Guignol and the spectators' reactions to them, were not, in reality, a surprise for those in the audience. The Grand-Guignol's reputation tended to precede it, and spectators were well aware of the sensations on offer, seeking the theatre out specifically.³⁴ Bearing in mind the earlier suggestion, cited in Deák, that the actors were operating in a twofold capacity, it seems that the spectator, too, was required to perform an unusually complex role, and one that grew to be problematic in the period following the Second World War.

³¹ Deák, p. 43

³² Ibid.

³³ P.E. Schneider, 'Fading Horrors of the Grand-Guignol', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 March 1957.

³⁴ Indeed, as I have written about elsewhere, there is evidence to suggest that certain of the fainting spectators were operating on a dual agenda: using the thrilling spectacles of the Grand-Guignol and the bodily reactions they provoked in order to support clandestine or extra-marital affairs, for example. Karen Quigley, 'Theatre On Call: Participatory fainting and Grand-Guignol theatre', *Performance Research*, 16:3 (2011), 105-107.

The actors at the Grand-Guignol were also very aware of the spectators' expectations, and the precarious position they (the actors) occupied on the stage. As indicated above, quite apart from the technical skill required of the Grand-Guignol actor in relation to the tricks and effects to be executed, the delivery and timing of lines was a necessary accomplishment. The danger of mishandling a technical moment on the Grand-Guignol stage was, in addition to the risk that the actors could hurt each other, of making the audience laugh due to the mistake. Alan Read has written about risk in relation to fire and safety in another context, and notes that 'for some there would be no point in being there without that risk', which, in this case, could perhaps pertain to the audience as well as the performers.³⁵ Thinking specifically of the danger of an unexpected audience reaction, Nicholas Ridout writes about 'laughter that is...improper in the more local sense of being unwanted, untimely and in the wrong place'.³⁶ Additionally, Simon Bayly in his evocation of the hysterical laugh, suggests that it operates as an equivalence 'to the instant of fiasco in a public dimension'.³⁷ The blundering Grand-Guignol actor certainly stumbles into the realm of what Bayly refers to as 'fiasco', or the sense that the performance could disintegrate 'from the inside out rather than from the outside in'.³⁸ And this danger of laughter from the audience was not always due to a mis-timing or other error by the actor. Paula Maxa was one of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol's most celebrated actors from 1917 to 1930, and wrote a memoir-style account of her experiences of performing at the theatre. Describing this challenging aspect of the acting style, she notes:

Often one word, one sentence said a little too fast, a little too brutally, caused a laugh... The atmosphere was tense, nerves on edge, a mere nothing could cause

³⁵ Alan Read, *Theatre & Everyday Life: an ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 229.

³⁶ Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 129.

³⁷ Simon Bayly, *A Pathognomy of Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

laughter. In the case of a mistake, I was completely abashed. When the atmosphere was lost, it was necessary to regain it, which was sometimes very hard and often impossible.³⁹

Concerning the audience's experience of Grand-Guignol in the early twentieth century, it is interesting to briefly examine the reactions of audience members and reviewers of a production in 2009 that attempted to re-present aspects of the Grand-Guignol style for a twenty-first century audience. *Terror 2009*, which was produced at Southwark Playhouse, London, will be returned to again below, as its exploration of Grand-Guignol provides an interesting way of thinking about the time-bound nature of unstageability when exploring this performance style. In this regard, it must be acknowledged that *Terror 2009* is a much shorter-lived phenomenon than the Parisian Grand-Guignol, with little broad consensus opened up about it as a work in the few years since its production. However, without betraying the production, I hope to momentarily find my way into a twenty-first century theatrical context in an attempt to discuss audience reactions to the Grand-Guignol now in relation to what I have already examined about audiences in the early twentieth century.

The principal contrast between the Parisian Grand-Guignol audiences and those at *Terror 2009* seems to be the relationship between the reaction to the work, and the body's response. Regarding the latter, Gordon notes that 'the cobble-stoned alley outside the theatre was frequented by hyperventilating couples and vomiting individuals'.⁴⁰ Hand and Wilson mention that 'members of the audience did faint', as does P.E. Schneider, writing in the *New York Times*:

³⁹ Deák, pp. 42-3.

⁴⁰ Gordon, p. 27.

The most familiar of the Grand Guignol's effects on spectators is to make them faint...it was rare indeed, in the good old days, not to see at least a couple of people, livid and tottering, fumble toward the nearest exit.⁴¹

Schneider's nostalgia for the 'good old days' of spectators losing consciousness might be further piqued by some of the responses to *Terror 2009*. For here, rather than the corporeal reactions described above, the audience responses are notable for their avoidance of subject matter to which their reaction might be more bodily than expected. For example, an online reviewer, Webcowgirl, confesses that she left the theatre before the last short play in the *Terror 2009* show, Neil LaBute's *Some White Chick*, because of her aversion to 'extreme sexual violence'.⁴² Similarly, Skye Crawford, writing for the website *FringeReview*, explains that '[h]orror is something I normally steer well clear of'.⁴³ Additionally interesting is the idea that any kind of audience reaction that deviates from silent watching is marked as significant. For example, the West End Whingers mention in their review of the show a moment that 'elicited a genuine scream from an audience member' (West End Whingers, 2009, p. 1), a reaction that Deák notes as commonplace in the Parisian Grand-Guignol productions, describing 'the cries of shock and fainting in the audience' as a matter of routine (Deák, 1974, p. 43).

However, between these reviews in 2009 and the material with which I have been primarily working thus far in this chapter, the Parisian Grand-Guignol in the early twentieth century, there exists a significant moment in the history of the performance

⁴¹ Hand and Wilson, p. 13; P.E. Schneider, 'Fading Horrors of the Grand Guignol', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 March 1957.

⁴² Webcowgirl, 'Review: Terror 2009: Theatre of Horror and Grand Guignol – Southwark Playhouse', *Life in the Cheap Seats – Webcowgirl's London theatre reviews*, <http://webcowgirl.wordpress.com/2009/10/22/review-terror-2009-theatre-of-horror-and-grand-guignol-southwark-playhouse/> [accessed 3 February 2013]

⁴³ Skye Crawford, 'Review: Terror Season 2009', *FringeReview*, <http://www.fringereview.co.uk/fringeReview/3199.html> [accessed 30 November 2009].

style. The point at which the Grand-Guignol begins to decline, the various arguments surrounding this period, and the style's subsequent re-staging in the early twenty-first century at Southwark Playhouse in the example I have just related, engender thought about unstageability as a concept pertaining to the Grand-Guignol. Referring back to Jacques Rancière's articulation of the time-bound nature of representation in certain cases, I aim to suggest that the establishment of representability attempted by Corneille in his revisioning of *Oedipus Rex* as *Oedipe* compares to the re-staging of the Grand-Guignol as *Terror 2009* in a way that moves towards questions of unstageability, building on the idea of 'literal unrepresentability' to which Rancière refers.

Decline

The demise of the Grand-Guignol theatre was a gradual and perhaps inevitable process. Less than a year after the outbreak of the First World War, Maurey handed the theatre over to Camille Choisy, who managed it from 1915 until 1928, a period that included the aforementioned 'golden age', the success of which was measured in a number of ways, from swelling audience numbers to, anecdotally, the proportion of audience members who fainted during the evening's proceedings.⁴⁴ Even so, from the beginning of the war, when violence and bloodshed began to become a feature of everyday life for millions of people in Europe, certain voices (among them André Antoine himself according to Gordon) began to sense that the significance of the Grand-Guignol as a form of theatre was diminishing.⁴⁵ However, this was not necessarily a problem exclusive to the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. As Deák mentions, it is important to note the relevance of the national closure of theatres in France in 1914, at the beginning of the war. The governmental decree closing the theatres was lifted the following year, and

⁴⁴ Deák, p. 37

⁴⁵ Gordon, p. 24

the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol resumed its operations.⁴⁶ It is difficult to completely disagree with Antoine and Gordon, though, and Deák notes this, too. In relation to the continuing lifespan of the Grand-Guignol upon its reopening in 1915, there seemed to be three significant issues in the foreground. As Deák continues,

The war added some problems. First, the unpolitical, unheroic and unpatriotic repertoire was looked on for a time as improper; second, it was doubted that the artificial horrors of Grand-Guignol would be strong enough in a time when so many people experiences the horrors of war; third, the question was asked whether, after eighteen years of existence, the formula of Grand-Guignol was not worn thin. Critics often pointed out these problems.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the success of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol during and after the First World War defied the critics, in large part due to its director at this time, Camille Choisy. Choisy shrewdly attempted to bring the daily reality of the war directly onto the stage in an attempt to maintain the relevance of Grand-Guignol to everyday life at the time. Taking inspiration from the trenches in order to add to his already impressive repertoire of torture and murder narratives (and methods for their realisation), and theatre's success continued for much of the time between the two world wars.

However, during and after the Second World War, it became clear that the popularity of Grand-Guignol was fading, and the daily reality of the war, combined with the rise of horror films in the cinema, caused the eventual collapse of the theatre form. In contrast to the success enjoyed by the theatre during and after the First World War, the impact of world events in the 1930s and 1940s upon a performance style that relied on naturalistic representations of extreme violence was just too great. Indeed, in an article on the Grand-Guignol in a November 1962 issue of *TIME Magazine*, its final director, Charles Nonon, is quoted as saying that the Grand-Guignol 'could never equal Buchenwald...[b]efore the war, everyone felt that what was happening onstage was

⁴⁶ Deák, p. 37

⁴⁷ Ibid.

impossible. Now we know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality'.⁴⁸ While this statement seems to be discussing (im)possibility on rather a larger scale than what is or is not possible to put upon a stage, for me it can also be read as a certain awareness of the temporal context of the unstageable. The anonymous writer of the *TIME Magazine* article describes the commencement of the demise in terms of the onset of the Second World War, one of the two main arguments made in relation to the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol's gradual decline.

It is interesting to note that Hand and Wilson, the back cover of whose book is described as 'a major evaluation of the genre as performance', detail Nonon as 'an administrator', brought in by Eva Berkson, an English director who directed the Grand-Guignol for a year before the Second World War and from 1946-1951.⁴⁹ Hand and Wilson make no other mention of Nonon other than to briefly mention the *TIME Magazine* quote where there is an allusion made to Buchenwald, though in any of the other English-language sources he is referred to as the final director of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. I raise this point because Nonon and his 1962 interview are important figures in this story, heavy referents both for the demise of the Parisian theatre. The fact that he has been omitted entirely (whether by accident or by choice) from such a key reference book on the subject of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol is significant, particularly considering the ongoing debate regarding the reasons for the demise. Hand and Wilson come down heavily on the side of the argument that the Grand-Guignol declined in popularity due to the rise of horror films. They explicitly state that it is 'more credible' that the Grand-Guignol 'became a victim of cinema'.⁵⁰ While this is certainly a feasible point of view, it cannot be denied that Nonon's interview, among

⁴⁸ *TIME Magazine*, 1962.

⁴⁹ Hand and Wilson, p. 23

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25

other sources, discussing the possibility that audiences of the late 1940s and early 1950s began to ‘know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality’, can also be considered as a position on the demise of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol.⁵¹ The fact that this outlook is presented in so many sources should not be grounds for its exclusion from one of the only English sourcebooks on the genre.

Nonon is quoted as saying that the theatre’s performances ‘could never equal Buchenwald’, one of the first (and largest) German Nazi concentration camps.⁵² He goes on to describe the pre-war suspension of disbelief held by the Grand-Guignol’s audiences, a suspension that, in Nonon’s opinion, was at times so secure that ‘everyone felt that what was happening onstage was impossible’.⁵³ Interestingly, in this article, Nonon’s reaction to the wartime decline in popularity of Grand-Guignol is described as ‘moaning’, something for which there is little or no evidence, apart from the assumption that most employees of a failing theatre would presumably be dismayed at the state of affairs. Nonon’s work at the theatre is not widely discussed across the spectrum of literature on Grand-Guignol, though his quote to *TIME Magazine* features in almost all of it, usually in relation to what Hand and Wilson refer to as ‘the derogatory criticism the theatre received immediately after the war that cast a long shadow over its drawn-out demise’.⁵⁴

It has been repeatedly noted, in analysis by Deák and in description by Nonon, that the ways in which the style began to deteriorate was partially linked to the world wars, and the difficulties inherent in asking spectators to watch theatrical representations of the kinds of atrocities that were happening in a very real sense all over Europe. However, as

⁵¹ *TIME Magazine*, 1962.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hand and Wilson, p. 24.

mentioned above in relation to Hand and Wilson in particular, another very valid reason for the decline of the Grand-Guignol as a style of performance was to do with the rise of cinema, particularly horror films. For Hand and Wilson, Grand-Guignol's gradual but certain demise was more due to competition with horror cinema than to the nature of a world war. They note that the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol reacted to the growing popularity of horror film by attempting to increase the stylized nature of the performance style, presumably in an effort to capture something that film could not emulate. However, one of the reasons that Grand-Guignol was such a success at the box office was its graphically realistic representation of physical violence and bloody horror. As Pierre Breyssac notes, cinema 'is able to present realistic illusion far more effectively'.⁵⁵ Thus, the bloodthirsty public, perhaps originally part of the audience at the Grand-Guignol, sought its thrills in front of a screen instead of a stage. These films were able to take on all of the characteristics of their theatrical counterparts at the Grand-Guignol, but 'with all the advantages of editing and location shooting', leaving the Parisian theatre with 'the impossible task of emulating the effects that cinema achieves'.⁵⁶ This competition in terms of naturalistic representation had an interesting effect on Grand-Guignol in the theatre. It is clear that, to an extent, the style had always been operating within an awareness of the impossibility of pure illusion. However, Hand and Wilson assert that

the Grand-Guignol was a self-styled theatre of naturalism *in extremis*, and embraced this 'impossibility' with the consequence that the stage effects that it developed were, out of necessity, extremely convincing in verisimilitude and delivery.⁵⁷

For me, this quote suggests that, were the 'extremely convincing' nature of the representation to be challenged in any way, the Grand-Guignol would have great

⁵⁵ Hand and Wilson, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 25, 39.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

difficulty constructing another identity, another defining feature. However, the idea of cinema superseding the Grand-Guignol was, in Paula Maxa's time, a far-away threat.

As Maxa describes,

[i]n the cinema you have a series of images. Everything happens very quickly. But to see people in the flesh suffering and dying at the slow pace required by live performance, that is much more effective. It's a different thing altogether.⁵⁸

The relationship between the Grand-Guignol in the theatre and the cinematic tradition is one to which it is necessary to refer in an articulation of the demise of the former in the mid-twentieth century. While it must be acknowledged that the specialist semiotics of the field of film are different to those of the theatre, the connection of the two fields in relation to the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol is something that André Loiselle and Jeremy Maron recognise in their recent edited volume, *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema*. Their book's premise takes a definition of theatricality that draws together a number of theatre and performance theoreticians including Samuel Weber, Tracy Davis, and Patrice Pavis, and proceeds to examine a wide range of cinematic examples in relation to aspects of their theatricality, from Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* to the Wachowski Brothers' *Matrix* trilogy. In a chapter on Grand-Guignol cinema, authored by Loiselle, he makes the point that there are very few film adaptations of Grand-Guignol plays, but that

many horror movies explicitly refer to the stage as the originator of screen terror and the privileged site of cinematic fear. These references to the theatre of horror do not merely pay lip service to a revered predecessor. Rather, the films that acknowledge the theatre of gore do so to reflect on the nature of horror on the screen.⁵⁹

To me, it seems that Loiselle, writing in cinema studies, and without the focus of the demise of the Grand-Guignol theatre form, presents a refreshing counterpart to the

⁵⁸ Hand and Wilson, p. xi.

⁵⁹ André Loiselle, 'Cinéma du Grand Guignol: Theatricality in the Horror Film' in André Loiselle and Jeremy Maron eds., *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 74.

theatre scholars, for whom, as I have noted, ‘the Grand-Guignol became a victim of cinema’ in the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁰ However, this is beyond the scope of the chapter, and Loisel’s presence here is rather to note that cineasts would, perforce, analyse horror cinema’s relation to Grand-Guignol theatre in a different and specialised way to my own work on this topic.

Returning to the culpability of horror cinema in the decline of the Grand-Guignol, and the move towards unstageability that I am suggesting, Hand and Wilson explore the idea that not only the general reception of the Grand-Guignol, but the details of its performance style, were affected by cinema. For them, the enhanced realism provided by the cinematic version of horror caused the Grand-Guignol theatre to intensify its ‘stylized conventions of performance’.⁶¹ In their practical Grand-Guignol laboratory, Hand and Wilson have noticed that their performers, whose previous experience of horror is usually film-based, attempt to model their performances on cinematic techniques. They describe this as ‘an impossible task’, and note that the modern-day makers of horror cinema can now create their desired effects via a myriad of complex and effective methods, tracing this back to their admiration of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, and the fact that similar effects ‘could be achieved within the context of an intimate theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century’.⁶²

A further aspect of the historical contextualisation of the decline of the Grand-Guignol in terms of horror cinema relates to the development of the latter over the same period. As mentioned above, it has been suggested that the rise of horror cinema was a crucial factor in the demise of the theatre, specifically due to the idea that, as Hand and Wilson

⁶⁰ Hand and Wilson, p. 25

⁶¹ Hand and Wilson, p. 25

⁶² Hand and Wilson, p. 39

note, cinema ‘could present horror more realistically than the theatre’, and Grand-Guignol retreated into an increasingly stylized production style as a result.⁶³ Further to this, the changes that took place in the horror cinema genre in the years following the Second World War can be seen as an additional dimension to the simple premise that ‘with the advent of such horror films, the Grand-Guignol finally had nowhere to go’.⁶⁴ The first of the key changes in horror cinema can be read in terms of Pierron’s assertion that the demise of the Grand-Guignol ‘coincides with the ascendancy of the Hammer film’.⁶⁵ Pierron here is referring to Hammer Films, a UK-based film production company which was established in the 1930s and became very successful in the 1950s due to a series of graphic horror films including *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *Dracula* (1958).⁶⁶ The series was lavishly filmed, with ‘lush cinematography, a tendency toward fluid camerawork, beautifully crafted period sets, and romantically suggestive clothing’, and was popular with French audiences, influencing French producers such as Jules Borkon to attempt to establish a homegrown tradition of horror cinema with films such as Georges Franju’s *Eyes Without a Face*.⁶⁷ Thus, the simultaneous development of horror cinema and decline of horror theatre could suggest that the work of the horror audience was shifting throughout the 1950s, perhaps in relation to the distance presented by the cinema screen that was impossible in the small Grand-Guignol theatre.

⁶³ Hand and Wilson, p. 25

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 25

⁶⁵ Pierron, p. xxxiv

⁶⁶ Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 5.

⁶⁷ Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *A Short History of Film* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 221. For an interesting discussion of *Eyes Without a Face* as influenced by Hammer films, and in a post-Second World War French context, see Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

However, for me, another of these changes in horror cinema relates to the notion that in the aftermath of the war, audiences were also drawn to comedy horror films such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948).⁶⁸ While this approach to horror could be seen as reminiscent of the early Grand-Guignol's *douche écossaise* structure of combining dramatic plays with comedy, the 'spoof' nature of such films was completely different in tone from that of the Grand-Guignol, which, even in its declining years, took the business of horror theatre seriously. It seems that the horror cinema audience, simultaneously enjoying the melodrama of the Hammer or Universal Monster films and the horror-comedies parodying them, had replaced the Grand-Guignol with another art form.⁶⁹ Further to this, such a replacing is comparable to the idea mentioned above regarding the New Theatre in Paris in the 1950s, and the shift from a bodily or visceral shock to a more contemplative and intellectual one.

Looking at the decline of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol specifically in terms of the spectators at the theatre, where audiences once cowered in fear in the 1910s and 1920s, they started to giggle with mirth in the 1940s. As the theatre continued on, 'the sounds of skulls being crushed and bodies plopping into acid vats began drawing guffaws instead of gasps'.⁷⁰ When '[n]o new twists in torture or tricks of realism – e.g. "blood" that coagulates as it cools – could lure the crowds back', the management strove to hold off the inevitable by adding sex and comedy to the horror and supernatural themes that had been part of the Grand-Guignol's signature style⁷¹. Another anonymous article in *TIME Magazine* recalls the efforts of the theatre to move with the times. The article quote the Grand-Guignol's director at that time, Eva Berkson, as justifying the theatre's

⁶⁸ Jeffrey S. Miller, *The Horror Spoofs of Abbott and Costello: A Critical Assessment of the Comedy Team's Monster Films* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2000).

⁶⁹ Hand and Wilson, p. 25

⁷⁰ *TIME Magazine*, 1950.

⁷¹ Ibid.

choice to produce ‘a shocker based on a trashy British novel about U.S. gangsters [Rene Raymond’s *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*], by asserting that “‘we’re bringing the tradition up to date’”.⁷² According to the article, this piece

was as different from the old Grand-Guignol classics as a Tommy gun is from a thumbscrew. Amid knifings and kneeings, kidnapping and murder, the meaty blonde Miss Blandish (Nicole Riche) spent most of two hours in panties and bra, successfully pursued by drooling Gangster Slim Grisson (Jean-Marc Tennberg). A moving touch for Grand-Guignol fans: Old Ma Grisson, the boss of the gang, beats Miss Blandish into submission with a rubber hose so that Slim won’t be annoyed by her cries when he rapes her.⁷³

This description, a frantic mixture of techniques aimed at the titillation of the audience, was an example of the attempts made by the Parisian Grand-Guignol in the 1950s to recapture its glory days, when ‘its 293 seats were filled nightly with a faithful, shuddering clientele’.⁷⁴ The article continues, noting that shuddering of a different kind became common practice for spectators for whom the violence on stage was no longer shocking, as ‘couples who took the curtained boxes in the rear of the house looked to themselves rather than to the stage for thrills’.⁷⁵ However, it is interesting to note that the practice of spectators embracing each other was also recorded in the earlier part of the century. Agnès Pierron notes that ‘women often prepared themselves for adultery by throwing themselves, half-dead with terror, into their neighbours’ arms: flirtation, Grand-Guignol style’.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, such a link between the earlier days of the Grand-Guignol, and the 1950s struggle to keep the theatre open was not a reflection of increased popularity of the form. In her defence of the attempts to retain audiences at the theatre, Berkson lamented that ‘the time had come...to modernise or die’.⁷⁷

⁷² *TIME Magazine*, 1950.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Agnès Pierron, *Le Grand-Guignol: le theatre des peurs de la belle époque* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), p. 98.

⁷⁷ *TIME Magazine*, 1950.

As already explored using *Peer Gynt* as a case study in Chapter One of this work, there are inextricable links between unstageability and the specific historical context under discussion. Invoking the decline of the Grand-Guignol here, a similar observation applies. However, while the chapter discussing Ibsen's play examined the idea that the possibilities of the unstageable in one theatrical-historical context do not necessarily apply in another context, in this second case study, an inverse process is apparent. Hand and Wilson claim that the Grand-Guignol is no longer compelling to audiences. However, far from a questioning or exploration of their assertion in relation to the possibilities of the unstageable, as I hope to do, they compare it to changing senses of humour, and how what is funny to an audience at one time is not funny in another time. They note that

[i]n the same way that we might nowadays be bewildered by how our ancestors laughed at what seem the weak or incomprehensible jokes of music hall and variety comedians, we must exercise extreme caution when making judgements about staged acts of violence which might today seem tame and unconvincing.⁷⁸

I find it necessary to quote these few lines in full, as they suggest an interesting parallel with my thesis' work, and thus a possible point of positioning for some of the arguments of this chapter. From Hand and Wilson's point of view, the notion that something could be watchable (or laughable-at) in one time and not in another is cause for concern, and they deem it necessary to admonish the reader for 'making judgements' about the passage of time and its impact on stageability.

With this in mind, however, I would argue that, instead of the 'extreme caution' Hand and Wilson advise, that an awareness of this idea could combine with a discussion of the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge in specific historical, geographical, social and theatrical contexts. While it may be true that the Grand-Guignol's 'staged

⁷⁸ Hand and Wilson, p. 13

acts of violence...might today seem tame and unconvincing', for me this is a fruitful point for exploration, not a closed moment of caution. If further explored, the fact of the Grand-Guignol's demise becomes an acknowledgement of the specificity of context, and thus of contextual theatrical limits, social, political, and logistical. It does not stand for the labelling of something that merely does not 'work' in the same way anymore, as this is quite a redundant and difficult charge to level at the early-twentieth century Parisian Grand-Guignol (and the work of its audience), but rather for the acceptance that the possibilities of the unstageable emerge for a particular example in a distinct context.

Indeed, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the supposition included in the title of this work purposely suggests a way of working that is speculative, heuristic, and indicative of potential. To borrow from Robert Harbison, as in the introduction, the Grand-Guignol is not unstaged, it will not necessarily remain unstaged, but it can be considered in terms of unstageability at a particular moment in time. This synchronic view of recent theatre history, and the Grand-Guignol's theatre history in this case, articulates an alignment with shifting theatrical limitations and social mores. For me, an examination of the possibilities of the unstageable can operate primarily in this synchronic manner. As has already been mentioned, to still the flux of history in such a way reveals moments of unstageability that a conventional, diachronic approach would necessarily cloud. Hand and Wilson's quote appears to advocate a diachronic methodology, as it advises caution in thinking about how a joke that would have been funny over half a century ago is not so now, or about how a moment on stage that would have been shocking in the 1940s is not the case anymore. However, looking at this quote synchronically, it becomes plausible to acknowledge both times, to recognise that something could be staged then but cannot be staged now, and to discuss this in

terms of a synchronic sense of the possibilities of the unstageable. This admission of both states, unstageable and stageable, allows for analysis of the decline of the Grand-Guignol to be read in terms of unstageability.

Further possibilities of the unstageable.

Thinking through further possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge in the case of the Grand-Guignol, an investigation of the specific historical context of its demise allows for a discussion of a theatre caught between a number of shifts and movements in the cultural and social circumstances of the time. Earlier in this chapter, the Grand-Guignol's position in terms of Realism and Naturalism was explored in terms of an exploration of the theatre's evolution from these forms of theatre and performance, particularly in relation to the Théâtre Libre. However, in an effort to specifically historically contextualise the decline of the Grand-Guignol, I will examine some aspects of European theatre (primarily French theatre) in the period following the Second World War, and discuss a particular shift in theatrical Modernism that resulted in a certain sense of unstageability emerging in relation to the Grand-Guignol, further to the reasons for the theatre's decline as articulated above. This kind of unstageability, in a convergent way to the previous chapter, and to the theoretical discussion in the introduction, relates specifically to a countering of Lyotard's notion of representing the unrepresentable, or representing that there is an unrepresentable. Indeed, in a manner contrasting with the discussion of *Peer Gynt*, much of the theatre involved in the shift in theatrical Modernism to which I will refer was particularly invested in such a sense of representing the unrepresentable, and I will return to this idea below.

In addressing the context of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol here, it is important to note that the theatrical-historical context of its demise is the specific purview of this section,

as distinct from a contextual overview of the entire lifespan of the Parisian theatre (1897-1962). Additionally, the geographical specificity of the Grand-Guignol is such that an emphasis on the context of place becomes significant in this chapter.⁷⁹ The previous chapter's exploration of *Peer Gynt*, which was composed mostly in Italy, and published and premiered in Norway, with its writer working in Germany for most of the period between publication and theatrical production, presented a different opportunity for contextualisation, underscoring the post-Romantic, pre-Modernist position of the play in the latter half of the nineteenth century in terms of a wider sense of European theatre and writing.

Here, the focus is on theatre in France (specifically Paris) in the context of the Second World War, and into the 1950s. Via this contextualisation, I aim to articulate the manner in which the decline of the Grand-Guignol, often attributed to a combination of the Parisian theatre audience's changing attitudes to violence during and after the Second World War, and the rise of horror cinema, can also be connected to its position within a certain theatrical-historical trajectory. In the same way that the previous chapter attempted to discuss Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in a post-Romantic, pre-Modernist context, evaluating the perceived unstageability of the play in relation to a certain shift from one set of artistic traditions to another, this second case study ventures to trace the outcome of the Grand-Guignol's location around a similar theatrical-historical cusp. Noting a movement from the 'escapist art' of the German Occupation in Paris, to a more

⁷⁹ As Hand and Wilson note, although a London Grand-Guignol was established for two years in the 1920s, and an Italian company gave some Grand-Guignol performances between World Wars I and II (Hand and Wilson, p. 20), both were directly influenced by the Parisian theatre, and neither could boast the lifespan of the original Grand-Guignol. For further information on the London Grand-Guignol, see Richard Hand, and Michael Wilson, *London's Grand Guignol and the Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Helen Freshwater, 'London's Grand Guignol: Sex, Violence and the Negotiation of the Limit', *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 16-34.

specifically existential and intellectual sense of theatre in the late 1940s and across the 1950s, very much related to both Martin Puchner's notion of the kind of anti-theatricality he perceives to be at work in modernist theatre, and Jean-François Lyotard's sense of representing the unrepresentable, the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable in relation to the Grand-Guignol over this same period can be discussed in terms of a movement of aesthetic and theatrical writing and practice.

Grand-Guignol during the Occupation and in the aftermath of WWII

During the German Occupation of France in the early 1940s, Parisian theatre audiences significantly increased, due to a variety of factors.⁸⁰ In particular, the popularity of historical, mythological and fairytale drama at this time, in a climate of insecurity, fear and poverty, can be linked to a sense of or desire for escapism.⁸¹ Light subject matter and an emphasis on the past also suggest the difficulties of the complex Vichy/German censorship process, through which any playtext for production had to pass.⁸² Indeed, with this in mind, Tom Bishop has argued that writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (whose play *Les Mouches* premiered during the Occupation) utilised the kind of mythological work that would proceed through the censors' offices as a 'frame of reference...[in order to] obtain the green light from the German authorities', while communicating a subversive and resistant message beneath the surface.⁸³ The notion that a writer such as Sartre, who was to become emblematic of French existential and phenomenological thought during the twentieth century, was operating in this way is indicative of the

⁸⁰ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 310

⁸¹ A comparable example is the rise of the musical (particularly the musical film, and Broadway musical) in the United States during the Depression, and again in the 1940s and 1950s. William Young and Nancy Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005).

⁸² David Bradby describes this process in *Modern French Drama 1940-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 16.

⁸³ Tom Bishop, *From the Left Bank: Reflections on the Modern French Theater and Novel* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), p. 30

climate of the time, certainly in terms of the lengths French playwrights were willing to go to in order to see their work performed.⁸⁴

Over the same period of time, it is interesting to note that the Grand-Guignol continued to attract audiences, not just with its regular Parisian clientele, but with the enemy troops stationed in the city.⁸⁵ Camille Choisy, who had held the role of director of the theatre during the First World War and until 1928, returned in the same post from 1940 to 1944, and the theatre similarly returned to its 1920s fare of plays by de Lorde and Méténier, which appear to have been popular with the occupying Nazi forces.⁸⁶ More specifically, Mel Gordon mentions that, despite the attempts of the German authorities to suppress the Grand-Guignol as ‘degenerate art’ (*entartete Kunst*), Hermann Goering regularly patronised the theatre.⁸⁷ In fact, as David Skal suggests, Goering’s preference may have prevented the closure of the Grand-Guignol during the Occupation, and John Callahan notes that the theatre was equally popular with the Allies after the Liberation of Paris in 1944.⁸⁸ With this in mind, the work of the Parisian audience at the Grand-Guignol during the Occupation could be said to function both in opposition to the Nazi

⁸⁴ However, it is interesting to note that the commercial success of *Les Mouches* contributed to the making of Sartre’s reputation to an extent (Bradby, p. 34).

⁸⁵ I note the popularity of the Grand-Guignol during the Occupation of Paris (and thus during the Second World War) because it is contextually useful to examine the potential origins for the decline of the form, and thus to articulate the possibilities of the unstageable. For example, it could be conjectured that, due to its popularity with occupying forces, the association between the theatre and the Nazi troops was such that its position as a popular art form could not be retrieved following the trauma of the Occupation and the war. Further to this, the connection between the popularity of the theatre and the directorship of Choisy during the same period could be additional grounds for suggestion that the return to a 1920s Grand-Guignol was significant in relation to its popularity.

⁸⁶ Choisy and his business partner Charles Zibell took over the Grand-Guignol in 1915 after the departure of Max Maurey. When Zibell sold his share of the business to Jack Jouvin in 1926, the artistic clashes between Choisy and Jouvin resulted in the former’s leaving the theatre in 1928. (see Gordon, p. 24; Hand and Wilson pp. 17-20; Pierron, p. 1383).

⁸⁷ Gordon, p. 30; also noted in Callahan, p. 169; David Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 226.

⁸⁸ Skal, p. 226; Callahan p. 170; also noted in Hand and Wilson p. 68.

forces suppressing art such as the Grand-Guignol, and in relation to an attempt to continue an aspect of cultural life as it had been before the Second World War.

As David Bradby notes, the significance of the Occupation to the Parisian theatre can be articulated in terms of its emphasis, in the aftermath of the Second World War and into the 1950s and 1960s, on the philosophical work of writers such as Sartre and Albert Camus, and also what Bradby refers to as ‘the New Theatre’, which is closely related to what Martin Esslin has described as Theatre of the Absurd.⁸⁹ In his monograph of the same name, Esslin’s work includes chapters on dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter and Jean Genet.⁹⁰ Similarly, in relation to New Theatre, Bradby refers to Adamov, Beckett and Ionesco, and also to Antonin Artaud, Jean Vilar, Roger Blin and Jean-Louis Barrault. This phase of Modernism, ‘centred in Paris’ as Esslin mentions, provides an interesting context for the demise of the Grand-Guignol, due particularly to this Modernism’s rejection of psychological Realism and Naturalism, two frequently intertwining ways of approaching theatre and performance in which the Grand-Guignol had its roots.⁹¹ Further to this, the significance of silence, emptiness, passivity and dialogue in the work of the New Theatre dramatists, and the diminishing importance of plot and character development, can be seen as antithetical to the kind of theatre performed at the Grand-Guignol, and thus indicative of

⁸⁹ I will be using the term ‘New Theatre’ to refer to this body of work, and not Esslin’s category of ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. Esslin himself has claimed the classification he made in 1961 to be more heuristic than prescriptive, referring to it as ‘a label...not a binding classification’ in 1965, and ‘a working hypothesis’ in a chapter entitled ‘The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered’ in 1971. Martin Esslin ed., *Absurd Drama* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 7; Martin Esslin, *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 12. Further to this point, Bradby considers the grouping ‘New Theatre’ (*nouveau theatre* in French) in terms of the practitioners’ similarities with the novel-writing practices of the *nouveaux romanciers* (new novelists) such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor at the same time. Bradby, pp. 56-7.

⁹⁰ Bradby pp. 32-3; also Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised edition (London: Methuen, 2001).

⁹¹ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 26

an additional factor in its demise after the Second World War.⁹² Indeed, this kind of shift in Parisian theatre can be related to the movement between Romanticism and Modernism as detailed in terms of *Peer Gynt* in the previous chapter, and also to the general sense, outlined in the introduction, that such shifts can point to the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable.

More specifically, a brief examination of some aspects of the New Theatre can help to illuminate the ways in which the work of the audience in the context of the Grand-Guignol can be seen as emergent from its socio-historical and theatrical-historical situation. Thus, in a consideration of theatre audiences in Paris during the decline of the Grand-Guignol, it is possible to suggest this theatrical-historical context as partially contributory to the theatre's demise. For example, the work of many of the New Theatre dramatists noted above articulated a self-conscious sense of questioning the form and the content of their plays. As Bradby discusses, these writers were

focussing on the problems involved in constructing any image of the world, refusing to accept at face value any account of experience, constantly probing for the reason why the account should take this form rather than that, adopt one set of images rather than another.⁹³

These values translated to a certain level of shock tactic or audience assault visible in the work, a description applicable to the Grand-Guignol in another context. However, while the dark comedy to be found in the work of Beckett or the use of nonsense language in Ionesco could be seen as a kind of assault on the theatre audience, this form of aggression emphasised the rejection of convention and a desire for change, rather than the more straightforward corporeal thrill or shock associated with the spectators at

⁹² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* p. 317; Bradby p. 62; Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge: 2006), p. 54.

⁹³ Bradby, p. 57

the Grand-Guignol.⁹⁴ This idea can be seen as indicative of the changing Parisian theatre in the post-war period and into the 1950s, and is further evidence for the decline of the Grand-Guignol as influenced not only by other art forms (such as horror cinema) and changing attitudes to violence following the Second World War, but also to the onward trajectory of theatrical Modernism in Paris. Thus, in an articulation of the specific historical and theatrical context of the theatre's decline, it is possible to note the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable, as distinct from (and in opposition to) notions of the Lyotardian unrepresentable, and presenting a theatrically-specific rendering of a movement not *towards* the Rancièrian aesthetic regime, but within it. It is in such a movement that I am locating some of the possibilities of the unstageable in this particular case.

It is possible to further articulate the connection between this aspect of Modernism and Lyotard's notion of representing the unrepresentable, or representing that there is an unrepresentable. To take examples from Beckett, this idea could be perceived in the barely perceptible voices at the beginning and end of *Not I*, the inability of Hamm to tell a story or a joke in *Endgame*, the silences in *Cascando*, *Footfalls* and *Ohio Impromptu*.⁹⁵ As Carla Locatelli notes, 'the text [becomes] the context of a nonrepresentable text: that is, of the silence, thus made visible as silence'.⁹⁶

Simultaneously, the oeuvre of Beckett is absolutely stageable (the stage directions at the beginning of many of his works testify to their complete stageability in very specific

⁹⁴ This sense of assault could be considered in terms of the actors' work in these contexts as well. For example, William Worthen has ventured that performing in some of Beckett's plays could be compared to 'some sort of medieval torture chamber', given the restrictions placed on the actor's body in plays such as *Not I*, *That Time* and *Happy Days*. William Worthen, *Modern Drama: Plays, Criticism, Theory* (California: Harcourt College Publishers, 1994), p. 472.

⁹⁵ Carla Locatelli discusses the latter three plays in 'Unwording Beyond Negation' in *Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political* ed. Henry Sussmann and Christopher Devenney, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) pp. 19-41.

⁹⁶ Locatelli, p. 34.

terms) and indicative of an exploration of unrepresentability. Lyotard's call in that we be 'witnesses to the unrepresentable' becomes clearer in these examples, and allows me to further clarify the difference between the unrepresentable and the unstageable, using the Grand-Guignol as a model.⁹⁷ As a counterpart to the notion of representing unrepresentability to which Lyotard refers (and to which Rancière adds the caveat of unrepresentability occurring in the movements between regimes, as discussed above), I offer a theatrically specific articulation of a moment where we note that something is either no longer stageable, or not yet stageable. Distinct from the not-stageable, it seems that perhaps we can only identify the unstageable (or call something unstageable) when we see something (else) staged. In this particular case, alongside the contextual effects of the Second World War and horror cinema on the Grand-Guignol, a sense that the latter is no longer stageable in the light of what is now staged in theatres in 1950s Paris is palpable. Beckett and others are, in Lyotardian terms, attempting to represent that there is an unrepresentable. The Grand-Guignol, a devotee of graphic realism, becomes unstageable by contrast.

Grand-Guignol and the question of Naturalism.

Daniel Gérould explicitly lays out the connection between André Antoine's work at the Théâtre Libre and Oscar Méténier's subsequent establishment of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol.⁹⁸ Antoine argued for and worked towards a new way of presenting theatrical performance, aiming to show life as it was. Drawing on scientific methodologies such as the experiment, the case history, and the clinical study, and using the term Naturalism to describe the work, Antoine and his colleagues at the Théâtre Libre used theatre as a

⁹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 82.

⁹⁸ Daniel Gérould, 'Oscar Méténier and *Comédie Rosse*: From the Théâtre Libre to the Grand-Guignol', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 28:1 (1984), 15-28.

frame for their investigations. They created a new sense of playwriting and a new style of acting, dismissing the rhetorical, declamatory tradition of much French theatre, and eschewing familiar plot formulae such as the device, the neat ending, and the orchestrated climax. In their place appeared a focus on working-class colloquial language and contemporary slang, uneducated characters, and simple plots of action. As G  rould continues, it was through these new theatrical modes, which revealed the underside of life, its people, and its situations, that ‘Antoine shattered long-standing taboos with [his plays’] uncensored dialogue and frank treatment of sexual matters’.⁹⁹ The crude stories and language portrayed at the Th   tre Libre exposed Parisian society’s hypocritical principles and the theatre world in which its ‘high ideals of traditional religious morality’ were played out.¹⁰⁰

However, the perceived originality of Antoine’s work in the area of Naturalism, seen as a significant force in the theatrical avant-garde in the late 1880s, began to wane throughout the 1890s, and Antoine closed the Th   tre Libre in 1894, feeling that the initial anti-formula idea had become a formula in itself.¹⁰¹ The short lifespan of this theatre seems inversely proportional to the enormous influence it has had on drama, theatre, and performance since its conception. This influence was felt immediately, as its themes and characteristics quickly filtered through to much of the French arts scene. Poetry, songs, and various visual art representations, all dealing with working-class France, transformed the Parisian artistic world. Applying to playwriting his ‘profound knowledge of the common people and their way of life...the downtrodden, the d  class  ,

⁹⁹ G  rould.,16.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ For further information on this, see Jean Chothia, *Andre Antoine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) for a discussion of Antoine’s departure from the Th   tre Libre (pp. 80-112). Also see David Whitton, *Stage Directors in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 18-21; J.L. Styan *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 31-48.

and the disinherited', was how Oscar Méténier found himself firstly writing plays for Antoine at the Théâtre Libre, and subsequently opening his own theatre in the ninth arrondissement in April 1897, as has been discussed throughout this chapter.¹⁰²

Richard Hand, in a chapter in *Eroticism and Death in Theatre and Performance*, reminds us of the Grand-Guignol's origins at the Théâtre Libre. He mentions that

[t]he concept of 'holding a mirror up to nature' would soon begin to take on a different revolutionary form with the establishment in 1887 of the Théâtre Libre by André Antoine...the new realism and naturalism which would aim to show the taboos of reality in all their brutality.¹⁰³

Indeed, reaching further back into the nineteenth century, Hand notes that the roots of Grand-Guignol can be traced to the play *Lucrece Borgia*, written by Victor Hugo in 1833 and adapted for opera libretto by Gaetano Donizetti in the same year. For Hand,

[t]he sex and horrific death in *Lucrece Borgia* – a disruptive and destructive force – on many levels it would seem – makes Hugo's play a clear precursor to the excesses displayed in the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, the most important theatre of death and eroticism in the history of Paris.¹⁰⁴

However, Hand is swift to point out that the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, far from the image of amplified and ridiculous horror that the use of the name now appears to invoke, was in fact always more concerned with a realistic, naturalistic aesthetic, violent, and bloody though this may have been. Hand notes that

[t]he term Grand-Guignol is now synonymous with heightened horror, but it was never Transylvanian: its horrors were always the actual or the possible. It is a theatre that made its reputation through its explicit and realistic stage effects and, so the legend goes, its ability to drive people to unconsciousness or nausea: as a gimmick they even had a resident doctor and, it is claimed, the first bar within a theatre for those who needed a stiff drink.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Gêrould, p. 18.

¹⁰³ Richard Hand, 'Labyrinths of the taboo: theatrical journeys of eroticism' in Karoline Gritzner ed., *Eroticism and Death in Theatre and Performance* (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), p. 70.

¹⁰⁴ Hand, in Gritzner, pp. 72-3.

¹⁰⁵ Hand, in Gritzner, p. 73.

The relationship between André Antoine's vision of Naturalism at the Théâtre Libre and the work carried out at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol remains an interesting paradox in terms of stageability. The enduring presence of a version of Antoine's Naturalism has contributed significantly to the textual approach, design ethos, and acting style of much twentieth and twenty-first century theatre. As Géroould notes, 'The Naturalist impetus in drama had set out to destroy all formulas, yet eventually became a formula itself'.¹⁰⁶

This chapter has attempted, among other things to demonstrate the decline of the Grand-Guignol in the mid-twentieth century, despite the notion that the theatre's greatest debt in form and content was arguably to the work produced at the Théâtre Libre, many of the motifs and techniques of which we continue to see on the stage in the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Géroould, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, Hand and Wilson attribute part of this complicated paradox to the site of the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, and the fact that the converted church on the rue Chaptal in Paris was not purpose-built for the artform it housed. They note that the experience of being at the theatre, and yet watching Grand-Guignol in such a space, would perhaps have 'play[ed] around with the boundary between "this is not *a* theatre and this is not *theatre*", a particularly interesting concept in relation to the ostensibly extreme and shocking realism of the Grand-Guignol form' [Hand and Wilson, pp. 30-1]. This is something that Simon Bayly, invoking Alain Badiou, has written about in another context. Comparing 'the theatre' to 'Theatre' in relation to the spectator, Bayly notes that 'the theatre' appears already-defined, 'a closed set of relations', and requires a specific kind of spectator 'whom it can address *as a citizen-subject*' [Simon Bayly, 'What state am I in? Or, How to be a spectator' in Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout, eds., *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 199-211, 204]. Conversely, 'Theatre' is a disruptive event, one which 'will have been (future perfect) that which interrupted "the theatre"' [Bayly, in Kelleher and Ridout, p. 204]. While the challenging definite article presented by Badiou (via Bayly) differs to Hand and Wilson's distinction between '*a* theatre' and 'theatre', and while the Grand-Guignol scholars focus their discussion on space rather than on the spectator here, the idea that 'theatre' (for Hand and Wilson) and 'Theatre' (for Badiou / Bayly) both suggest a sense of disarray is an interesting parallel. At the Grand-Guignol, the 'play' engendered in the ambiguity between being 'at' the theatre and yet not being in '*a* theatre', encourages a connection to the idea that, on the one hand 'the theatre' is something with a 'set of organized opinions', and also that 'Theatre' emerges from a certain void within 'theatre'. Additionally, to return briefly to the idea of the site, the fact that the material being explored at the Grand-Guignol was being performed in a church, and that this (deconsecrated) religious building was in Pigalle, an area of Paris associated with the sex industry, creates an additional backdrop for the theatre that, while beyond the main topics under discussion in this chapter, pertains to a discussion of naturalism in relation to the unstageability of the Grand-Guignol.

Grand-Guignol in the twenty-first century

I have already mentioned that the rise of horror cinema and the context of the Second World War were significant contributing factors to the decline of the Grand-Guignol. Returning to a theatrically-specific aspect of Rancière's notion of 'literal unrepresentability', a concept which has been discussed in the introduction to this thesis as referring to the impossibility of staging something at a particular time and/or in a particular place, an additional aspect of this idea can also be illustrated using the Grand-Guignol as an example. In Rancièrian terms, the shift of a regime occurred, allowing for the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable in relation to the, Grand-Guignol. In the same essay, Rancière discusses the problematic staging of Corneille's updated version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* 'today', also noted in the thesis' introduction. With that in mind, in this section I aim to suggest a similar trajectory for the Grand-Guignol. Neil LaBute's reworking of some features of Grand-Guignol in his short play *Some White Chick*, presented as part of The Sticking Place's *Terror 2009: Theatre of Horror and Grand-Guignol* festival at Southwark Playhouse in London in late 2009, allows me to continue to develop a discussion of the possibilities of the unstageability in relation to Grand-Guignol, via Rancière's examination of the literally unrepresentable.

Terror 2009: Theatre of Horror and Grand-Guignol, conceived by London-based theatre company The Sticking Place, brought together the playwrights Lucy Kirkwood, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, and Neil LaBute, each of whom was commissioned to write a short (20-30 minutes) play that would bring elements of the Grand-Guignol to a twenty-first century London audience. These short plays were interwoven with vignettes and cabaret songs, which alternately paid homage to and parodied the Grand-Guignol theatre form. As Rancière discusses in 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' in

The Future of the Image, as well as in the chapter ‘A Defective Subject’ in *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, and as has been explored above, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* was considered unstageable for the theatres of mid-seventeenth century France, spurring Corneille to rewrite the play in order to cater for the audiences of the time, only for an identical problem regarding the staging of that reworking to appear in a future time. It seems that some parallels may be drawn with The Sticking Place’s production, which, for me, aimed to implement a similar regeneration of Grand-Guignol. In this case, the attempt to impose a reworked staging upon a very specific theatre form that had been unstageable in its original mode for decades performs an interesting articulation of its previous unstageability. I aim to show how The Sticking Place’s attempt to resurrect the characteristics of Grand-Guignol in *Terror 2009: Theatre of Horror and Grand-Guignol* can be connected to Corneille’s reworking of *Oedipus Rex* as discussed by Rancière, further reinforcing the links between the possibilities of the unstageable and the specific theatrical-historical context of the example under discussion.

The plot of Neil LaBute’s short play for *Terror 2009*, *Some White Chick*, features two young, white, middle-class, American men, who seem to be hiding out in some sort of underground room with extensive quantities of junk food and technological apparatus. It becomes clear at the beginning of the play that there is a third person in the room, an adolescent girl who is tied up on the floor and is being physically and sexually assaulted by the young men, who have been filming their activities and posting them on the internet. In response to the girl’s whimpering pleas for help, one of the men stabs her to death, leaving them victimless for the next instalment of their gruesome video diary. After a brief argument, one of the men sets up the camera and films, in close-up detail, the other as he rapes the corpse. The audience are able to see this scene both as a live

feed from the camera's point of view on a large projection screen, as well as what they can see of the floor of the stage from their seats.

The reviews of LaBute's piece that I read, after seeing the piece performed on 16 October 2009, unconsciously drew some interesting initial comparisons with audience reactions to the Grand-Guignol at its height in the 1910s and 1920s, as well as some more obvious connections with the Grand-Guignol's efforts to retain its audience in the 1950s. Thus, the work of the audience in its particular context becomes clear by comparison. As mentioned above, one blogging critic, having left the theatre before the short play started, mentioned in her review that 'extreme sexual violence doesn't sit well with me'.¹⁰⁸ Their early twentieth century Parisian counterpart would have revelled in the experience of watching something that 'doesn't sit well', while the early twenty-first century reviewer leaves, in an almost passive-aggressive violence. Meanwhile, the Independent's Maxie Szalwinska noted that the piece 'just dazes you with its nastiness'.¹⁰⁹ The idea of the work at the Grand-Guignol 'dazing' a spectator was precisely the reaction aimed at by its many directors, from Oscar Méténier through to Charles Nonon. In terms of a comparison of content, the subject matter of the short plays of both the original Grand-Guignol, and the attempted reworking in October 2009 at Southwark Playhouse, dealt extensively with violence, assault, brutality, and bloodshed. Szalwinska's description of *Some White Chick* as 'a depiction of human savagery or a prurient provocation that cashes in on brutal violence' chimes' would have delighted the *guignoleurs*.¹¹⁰ However, it seems that, working from Rancière and the idea of 'literal unrepresentability' and how this can align with my own thoughts on the contextual nature of unstageability, as explored above, it is possible to show how

¹⁰⁸ Webcowgirl 'Review: Terror 2009'

¹⁰⁹ Maxie Szalwinska, 'Terror 2009: Theatre of Horror and Grand Guignol, Southwark Playhouse, London', *The Independent*, 28 October 2009.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

LaBute's attempt to use Grand-Guignol here operated in much the same way as Corneille's effort with *Oedipus Rex* in 1659, albeit in a different situation and for different reasons. With what might be termed a Corneillean impulse to update what Rancière describes as the 'literally unrepresentable', LaBute had attempted to bring into 2009 those elements of Grand-Guignol that led to its decline in the twentieth century.

Further to this, the relationship between the specifically gendered nature of the violence in *Some White Chick*, the reactions of the twenty-first century critics above, and the contrast these reactions present in relation to the audiences and critics of the original Parisian Grand-Guignol, is certainly to do with the audience's changing attitudes towards representations of violence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. For example, critiques of representations of violence as 'gratuitous', including the sorts of assertions that Szalwinska makes above, owe much to feminist discourse, and feminist critiques of representations of violence and sexualised violence against women. Reading this resistance by the spectators and critics to *Some White Chick*, and noting the repeated 'warning signs' visible in the theatre space before and during the performance as will be related below, it is clear that a feminist critique of LaBute's piece could be anticipated in this regard. While my discussion of unstageability in relation to the Grand-Guignol will not also encompass a full analysis of this kind, it is important to acknowledge that a twenty-first century audience encountering these tropes (sexual violence, the tortured woman), is also an audience who is living in the wake of feminism, and that a comparison of the work of the audience in both examples is socio-politically charged in this way.

Sitting in Southwark Playhouse before the performance started, I was reminded of an anecdotal example given by Deák relating the success of the Grand-Guignol's

performances to how many spectators had lost consciousness due to the impact of what they saw on the stage.¹¹¹ Indeed, Deák goes on to describe how one night, the in-house doctor at the Grand-Guignol, employed by the theatre to attend to the audience members who had fainted, himself succumbed to the naturalistic horror being played out on the stage, an anecdote also mentioned by Hand and Wilson, Pierron, Gordon, and Daniel Gérould in their work on the Grand-Guignol. In an interesting comparison with this story, *Terror 2009* took no chances on twenty-first century audiences, and *Some White Chick* was preceded by a multitude of warning posters in the bar and toilets of the theatre. These posters were combined with repeated warnings from theatre staff both before the performance and during the interval, and more directly by a brief vignette immediately before the play began, which showed two young men deeply involved in a game of Russian Roulette. With that in mind, and in relation to my awareness of some of the reasons for the decline of the Grand-Guignol in the mid-twentieth century, I began to think about how the staging of this act could begin to speak to the theatre form it was attempting to emulate. I wondered if the 2009 audience's experience of both horror film and the kinds of images of violence available daily online or on televised news programmes would enter into a productive or problematic dialogue with the viewing of their theatrical counterparts, in line with Hand and Wilson's assertion about performers in their Grand-Guignol laboratory, and attempts to imitate filmic techniques in their performances. Finally, thinking through Berkson's and Nonon's attempts to re-invigorate the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the 1950s, I wondered whether the staged images at Southwark Playhouse would be dismissed in the same way that the Grand-Guignol's audience began to move away from the theatre's graphically naturalistic stagings of violence, and, perhaps, towards horror cinema, as I have noted above.

¹¹¹ see Deák, p. 38

In order to work through the 2009 piece in relation to Rancière's writings on literal unrepresentability, and to arrive at the conclusion that *Some White Chick* engenders an interesting dialogue with the original Grand-Guignol, comparable in places to that existing between Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Corneille's *Oedipe*, it is worthwhile to shift focus slightly in order to examine the first piece of the evening, Lucy Kirkwood's *Psychogeography*, and its exploration of Grand-Guignolesque themes.¹¹² Set in the basement of a south London house in which fourteen people had previously been tortured and murdered, Maxine and Ian, a young married couple explored their (understandable) reservations about making an offer for the house to their estate agent. As the play progressed, Maxine, initially intent on convincing Ian that they should buy the house, became more uncertain as they discovered what might have been the 'torture-chair' used by the perpetrator of the crimes. On Maxine's insistence, Ian tied her into the chair, 'for fun' as she termed it, but the situation began to alter as Ian, apparently affected by the atmosphere of the room and the psychogeographical imprint of what had taken place there, seemed to take on what may have been the persona of the person responsible for the torture that had taken place. Any possible awareness that the walls of this Grand-Guignolesque chamber of horrors were seemingly seeping blood throughout Kirkwood's piece was hampered by the fact that the entire play took place in almost complete darkness, lit only by a single lantern and the torches held by the characters. Therefore, when fresh blood appeared on Maxine's blouse and Ian's face towards the end of the piece it provoked quite a visceral shock reaction in the audience, certainly an aim of the Grand-Guignol theatre.

¹¹² The title of this play, a word initially defined by Guy Debord and the Situationists in the mid 1950s, refers to the notion that people can become emotionally and behaviourally affected by their surroundings, their environment, and the geography into which they find themselves inserted. Steve Pile, "The problem of London", or, how to explore the moods of the city', in Neil Leach ed. *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing in the Modern Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 203-16, 211.

There are a number of elements of the Grand-Guignol to be found in Kirkwood's work here. The creation of atmosphere, the gradual build-up of suspense and tension, and an effective balance between humour and horror all displayed a useful and intelligent reading of the characteristics of Grand-Guignol, as well as an awareness of the time in which the new piece is situated. On the other hand, LaBute's piece displayed none of those distinguishing features of Grand-Guignol that are considered to be durable by the academics and practitioners looking at the work, and all of the features that, due to the changing nature of the times, led the theatre into a gradual but nonetheless total decline in the last century. Indeed, Berkson's exclamation that the Grand-Guignol needed to 'modernize or die', and her attempts to insert sex and comedy into the formula that, in the late 1940s and 1950s, had an ever-dwindling audience, can be traced to some of the elements of LaBute's short play that have been outlined above.

The comparisons between Rancière's discussion and my own are as follows. Rancière mentions that Corneille's *Oedipe* is 'never staged today'.¹¹³ For Rancière, the playwright seems to fail in his aim to establish the stageability that he felt was lacking with Sophocles' play. Similarly, the elements of Grand-Guignol focused on by LaBute in his short play, elements which led to its deterioration in the mid-twentieth century, did not travel well across temporal and contextual boundaries. An attempt to stage necrophilia with so much serious attention paid to the verisimilitude of the representation, and very little to the humour or suspense so characteristic of the Grand-Guignol, speaks to the lingering unstageability of the form, and to the connection I have made above about the Grand-Guignol's particular relationship with naturalistic theatre. Further to this, the kind of skill employed by the performers of the original Grand-

¹¹³ Rancière, 2007, p. 117

Guignol involved an extremely well-balanced and demanding multi-tasking, which consistently required them to

completely inhabit the psychology and physicality of the violence as though it is real. At the same time, they must...execute the technical demands of the stage violence...maintain the arc of the play and remain aware of and open to the other actors on the stage.¹¹⁴

The skills of the Parisian Grand-Guignol performers were not evident in The Sticking Place's production of *Some White Chick*, and arguably this contributed to a certain type of unwatchability insofar as it became difficult to watch what became quite an uninteresting representation of the violent act under discussion in the piece. However, at no point did the piece have an effect on the spectator in the way that the original Grand-Guignol seemed to, causing audience members to literally depart from their senses in some cases, as has been mentioned. For me, this articulates the notion, set out above, that the possibilities of the unstageable as I have discussed them so far in this thesis, are inextricably linked to the historical and theatrical context of the particular theatrical moment. As with *Peer Gynt*, a production Grand-Guignol in the twenty-first century does not seem to articulate an unstageability so much as it reminds me that the contextual reasons for the decline of the Grand-Guignol theatre in the 1950s and 1960s constitute the emergence of the possibilities of the unstageable, and the indignant reaction of a twenty-first century audience to sexual violence does not.

Conclusions

Combining this chapter's discussions with that of the previous chapter on *Peer Gynt*, and anticipating the next chapter's exploration of some of the twenty-first century pieces of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, it seems that the possibilities of the unstageable in relation to both historical context and a sense of a response to a particular shift or crisis

¹¹⁴ Hand and Wilson, p. 34

point in art or society can be explored in a number of different ways, presenting a further historical fluctuation of unstageability. For example, my examination of the possibilities of the unstageable in relation to *Peer Gynt* were mostly focused on its first production, at the beginning of a successful lifespan that the play still enjoys. In this chapter, the discussion was focused on the final wind-down of a theatre, which could have suggested much more to do with what is not stageable than with the possibilities of the unstageable. For me, the former (not stageable), which I will return to in the conclusion of this thesis, suggests a particular emphasis on the logistically possible, distinct from ideas of unstageability, which I distinguish in terms of the specific context of the example, and also in relation to the Rancièrian idea of a shift from one regime to another, or, in this case, a particular movement within a regime.

As I move towards the third and final case study, discussing the work of Società Raffaello Sanzio, it is important to acknowledge more theatrical historical movement, from the mid-twentieth century through to the early twenty-first century. I began this chapter by mentioning the phases of Modernism suggested by Bruce McConachie, and, during the analysis of the Grand-Guignol's decline in relation to changing Modernisms, suggested that the fluctuation of Modernism throughout the twentieth century could be seen as a particular historical context through which the possibilities of the unstageable could be briefly visible. In this sense, it is interesting to complete my investigation into questions of unstageability with an example that reaches beyond Modernism (and, arguably, beyond Postmodernism) and finds its context in a different way. This will allow me to further develop the argument that, in the same way that the possibilities of the unstageable have been shown to emerge at specific contextual moments, the contemporary context presents a different way of thinking about these possibilities. This is potentially due to the multiple modernisms I have outlined so far in this thesis, but

also to the further fragmentation of the relationship between text and performance visible in postmodern theatre. Interestingly, to continue with Rancière's notion of regimes, Postmodernism is for him not specifically a movement towards another regime, but rather an effect of a form of disillusionment with Modernism, and simply the name under whose guise certain artists and thinkers realized what Modernism had been: a desperate attempt to establish a 'distinctive feature of art' by linking it to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rupture.¹¹⁵

With this in mind, in the third chapter, the idea of the Rancièrian movement from one regime to another (indicative for him of a certain sense of unrepresentability) will operate in a more reflective way than in the cases of *Peer Gynt* and *Grand-Guignol*. By this I mean that the specific context and/or particular shift or crisis point through which the possibilities of the unstageable can become apparent can be discussed, in *Societas* Raffaello Sanzio's work in relation to the remains of a (modernist) past, and also, to the notion of possible (beyond postmodern) futures that have not yet arrived.

¹¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 8.

Chapter Three: Societas Raffaello Sanzio

So far in this thesis, it has been suggested that the work of Ibsen around the time of *Peer Gynt* constitutes a certain sense of theatre moving away from Romantic evocations of form and content, and towards a modernist approach in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Chapter Two, I ventured that the decline of the Grand-Guignol could be seen as indicative of a shift in popular form, which gravitated away from the graphic horror theatre's popularity in Paris in the earlier twentieth century; and also a shift in theatrical Modernism, which moved from a questioning of Realism and Naturalism to a broader examination of theatricality and the theatrical form. These shifts have been noted in relation to the specific examples explored as symptomatic of particular moments in time when the idea of unstageability has emerged in relation to theatre, building on a trajectory of language that draws heavily on notions of unrepresentability from Lyotard and Rancière, who in turn have utilised ideas from Kant and Burke in their articulations of particular kinds of representational impossibility, as I have outlined in the introduction to the thesis. In this chapter, I will be exploring the twenty-first century work of Italian performance theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio, and noting the emergence of a more fragmented sense of the unstageable via a similar (though distinct) shift between notions of Postmodernism and the postdramatic, and what might be thought of as a particular aspect of a post-Holocaust ethics of staging.

Further to this, the swathe of time separating the decline of the Grand-Guignol in Paris from the twenty-first work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio in Italy (and internationally) can be anchored in terms of this thesis' utilisation of a range of

theatrical examples that might be said to fall broadly within the historical trajectory of Modernism. As discussed in the previous chapter, a certain anti-theatricality is visible in a range of mid-twentieth century dramatic work, a suspicion of the theatre and theatricality that is, for me, articulated in terms of attempts to represent the unrepresentable. While this notion played out in Paris in the post-Second World War period in terms of what David Bradby refers to as New Theatre, a previously popular (though alternative) theatre such as the Grand-Guignol, already struggling to continue to operate due to pressure from the success of horror cinema and changing social and political perceptions of violence, could not correspond to its modernist environment, resulting in the kind of historical moment where the possibilities of the unstageable could be said to emerge. Indeed, decades earlier, a different crisis point for a theatre moving between Romantic theatrical concepts such as closet drama and ‘mental theatre’, and a newly Modernist questioning of the theatrical medium, created a specific historical context where unstageability in *Peer Gynt* might be said to operate. In this third and final case study, I will explore Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s later work in terms of a shift beyond Modernism and Postmodernism, acknowledging a conceivable function of the twenty-first century’s fragmented possibilities of the unstageable in anticipating a future that has not quite arrived yet. This speaks to the notion, outlined in the introduction, that calling something unstageable which has been staged exposes a certain need for the idea of unstageability, allowing the theatre to aim towards a future (when something will be stageable that is currently unstageable) or contradict a past (something is unstageable now that was previously staged) in the use of the term or its equivalences as they arise.

However, in order to continue to braid together the case study examples I have been discussing across this thesis, it is important to situate Societas Raffaello Sanzio's later work in its own historical context as has been done in earlier chapters, in order to consider the possibilities of the unstageable in this case as emergent from a particular context. Aligning with previous explorations of *Peer Gynt*'s position between a late Romanticism and an early Modernism, and the decline of the Grand-Guignol in the midst of a constantly shifting Modernism, Societas Raffaello Sanzio seems to occupy a position that might be considered in terms of something that is beyond Modernism. While it is tempting to examine this context in terms of Postmodernism specifically, and I will be briefly noting this, it seems that Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work suggests a movement beyond 'conventional' postmodern theatrical tropes (though this in itself presents a problematic terrain), and begin to articulate something beyond even the postmodern. With this in mind, I aim to discuss the context of this company's work in a number of ways. Firstly, the postmodern and postdramatic suggest certain ways of positioning the company and the work, drawing on both without being framed as either specifically. Secondly, the historicisation of the company's productions in the early twenty-first century will be considered, particularly in terms of the post-Holocaust trajectory of thought through which much later modernist and postmodernist art has been articulated.

Finally, the context that the work describes for itself will be briefly noted. By this, I refer to the difficulties inherent in historically contextualising the present, which, though not impossible, finds me in the midst to an extent, with little sense of how the work *will* be historicised. With this in mind, I will be discussing some ways in which Romeo Castellucci, as artistic director of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, has offered

possible frameworks for contextualising the company's work as an emerging practice, as it were, its relation to what remains of a past, and also, arguably, the remembering of a few possible futures we have not arrived to yet. In using this multi-faceted approach to contextualising this third and final case study, I do not claim a complete departure from previous methodological work as done so far in this thesis. Rather, in dealing with the context of the present and very recent past, I am attempting to open out such a question of contemporary contextualisation in a way that does not fix the company and their work into 'this' contextual narrative or 'that'. Additionally, this responds appropriately to the multifarious developments of theatrical Modernism in the twentieth century, and their influences in the twenty-first century.

The postmodern, the postdramatic

Elinor Fuchs notes the challenge of describing what she refers to as 'the contemporary alternative theatre' as postmodern, when a range of terms including 'avant-garde, experimental, alternative, deconstructive, postmodern, "new"' are all used to characterise contemporary theatrical practices.¹ Despite her acknowledgment of these difficulties, Fuchs chooses to utilise the term 'postmodern' in her discussion of such practices, articulating the theatrical postmodern specifically by exploring particular examples of theatrical performance that define their existence 'by measuring [the] distance' between their work, and the work of the dramatic theatre tradition (as distinct from contemporary practitioners/companies who measure similar distances from themselves to other artforms such as dance, performance art, popular music

¹ Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of the Character*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 9.

etc).² Though acknowledging a similar acceptance of the complexities ‘that intrude upon any categorical definition of what the “postmodern” actually *is*’, Nick Kaye argues that certain kinds of contemporary performance can be defined as postmodern insofar as they are oppositional to and disruptive of the ‘modern’ artistic practices that have come before them, thus noting what the postmodern might *do*. As Kaye continues,

while the ‘modernist’ project rejects the past precisely because it can be read, understood and so transcended, the postmodern self-consciously ‘replays’ images of a past that cannot be known, but that can only be constructed and re-constructed through a play of entirely contemporary references to the idea of the past.³

This description of Modernism is arguably a corroboration of Puchner’s assertion as discussed already in this thesis in relation to the connections between Modernism and ‘anti-theatricality’, a rejection (or, in Puchner’s terms, ‘suspicion’) of previous conventions of theatricality.⁴ Continuing the practice established earlier in this thesis, which situated the previous two case study examples at various points on a certain trajectory of Modernism, it is possible to suggest, following Kaye, that Società Raffaello Sanzio’s work occupies a particular way of thinking about the postmodern insofar as it can be considered as disruptive of some aspects of modernist theatre practice in the earlier twentieth century, and/or approaches the past from the perspective Kaye suggests above. For example, the company’s exploration of images of figures from history (Mussolini and Charles de Gaulle in *Tragedia Endogonidia*, Jesus Christ in *Tragedia Endogonidia* and *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the*

² Fuchs, p. 7. This is also noted in Daniel Jerrigan ed., *Drama and the Postmodern: Assessing the Limits of Metatheatre* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 113.

³ Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994), p. 20.

⁴ Kaye, pp. 1-3.

Son of God, Andy Warhol in *Inferno*) could be read as ‘replays’ of the past in Kaye’s terms.

Further to this, and regarding what Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to as postdramatic theatre, it is interesting to note that Societas Raffaello Sanzio is grouped with a long list of companies and solo performers towards the start of Lehmann’s monograph in a section entitled ‘Names’, and dealing with a ‘panorama of the field of study that opens up under the name of postdramatic theatre’.⁵ This engenders thought about the kind of contemporary context the work occupies in relation to other companies whose performances have been described as postmodern. In particular, I refer to the work of Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group.⁶ This leads me to a discussion of the ways in which not just the scholars of these contemporary artists, but the artists themselves, might suggest a context for their own work in a way that complements but perhaps further sharpens a recommendation of any particular historical contextual narrative.

Curation as context

In a brief exploration of the kind of context Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work describes for itself, I do not intend to anthropomorphise the company’s productions, as could be inferred from the phrasing chosen. Rather, I will attempt to discuss two of the ways in which Romeo Castellucci has suggested a positioning for the work in its

⁵ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge: 2006), pp. 23-24.

⁶ For example, the three companies are grouped together in the following sources. Margaret Hamilton, *Transfigured Stages: Major Practitioners and Theatre Aesthetics in Australia* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), in relation to these groups’ distance from the theatre, p. 194, and ‘the postdramatic theatre paradigm’, p. 196; Milija Gluhovic, *Performing European Memories: Trauma, Ethics, Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), in terms of the companies [doing away with] the primacy of the text’, p. 103; Matthew Wilson Smith, *The total work of art: from Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2007), referring to the three groups as ‘recent experimental theatre practitioners’, p. 228.

contemporary context. Firstly, I refer to Castellucci's curation of two exhibition-festivals in 2005 and 2013, as the collection of work gathered there provides a certain landscape of practices for me to speculate upon such a context. In September 2005, Castellucci curated the theatre section of the Venice Biennale, with an event entitled *Pompei. The Novel of Ashes*. Artists gathered by Castellucci for this event included Richard Maxwell, Goat Island, Bock & Vincenzi, Chris Watson, Carl-Michael von Hausswolff, Habillé d'Eau, Orthographe, Via Negativa, Cie Nanaqui and Abbatoir Fermé.⁷ To begin with, the international profile of these groups (from the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Slovenia, Belgium, Italy and France) suggests an affinity with the multi-regional. The context of this event in relation to Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Tragedia Endogonidia* is particularly striking, as the latter took place over three years (2002-2004) in ten different locations, some of which overlap with the nationalities presented in *Pompei. The Novel of Ashes*. Additionally, the multi-disciplinary work collected by Castellucci for this festival (including theatre, dance, video art, sound recording, visual art and photography) recalls, among other things, Societas Raffaello Sanzio's long-time collaboration with composer Scott Gibbons, the company's investigations of art history and iconoclastic images, and their performative explorations with a range of organisms and objects, from horses to babies to complex machinery. Finally, the kind of work done by many of these practitioners encourages a connection between Castellucci's practice and notions of the experimental, the postmodern, and the rest of Fuchs' adjectives to describe the contemporary alternative theatre.

⁷ Claudia Castellucci and others, *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 18.

In late June 2013, Castellucci curated the ‘Idiom’ section of the Malta festival in Poznan, Poland, which he titled *O Man, O Machine*. Performing at this event was a range of experimental artists (as with the Venice example, the artists gathered in Poznan hailed from across the world, mostly from central and eastern Europe in this case) described under headings such as music, visual arts, dance, film and theatre.⁸ I mention these categories (again) because they allow me to speculate that, in 2013, Castellucci continues to situate Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work (a recent piece of which, *The Four Seasons Restaurant*, appeared in another section of the festival alongside a programme of talks about the company) in an experimental, multi-disciplinary setting. It is also interesting to note that five of the twenty-one featured performances in *O Man, O Machine* were grouped as theatre, a contextual reminder, perhaps, that Societas Raffaello Sanzio cannot be discussed specifically as theatre, particularly in terms of the sort of representational theatre that could be ascribed to *Peer Gynt* and the Grand-Guignol. Indeed, some of the theatrical work that appeared in Castellucci’s curated event spoke specifically to tropes associated with postmodern work, such as intertextuality, pastiche, the fragmentation (or death, as Fuchs would have it) of character and illusion. For example, Polish director Marta Górnicka, whose *Requiemachine* will play as part of *O Man, O Machine*, notes that

The point of departure for this work was the rhythmic-robotic language of Broniewski’s poems and his shocking poetic life, which got mixed in my head with Benetton’s advertising campaign “Unemployee of the year”, the Imperial March from Star Wars, the sound of poet’s larynx eaten through by cancer.⁹

For me, a directorial statement such as this, and the multi-textual layering it suggests, recalls the work of companies such as the Wooster Group, and their juxtaposition of

⁸ Malta Festival Poznan, ‘Idiom: O Man, O Machine’ <http://malta-festival.pl/en/program/idiom-czlowiek-maszyna> [accessed 30 June 2013]

⁹ Malta Festival Poznan, ‘Marta Górnicka’ <http://malta-festival.pl/en/program/marta-gornicka-requiemaszyna> [accessed 30 June 2013]

extant dramatic texts with other performative and textual material, a technique (and a company) often linked to notions of postmodern theatre. Additionally, the visibility of non-theatrical works in Castellucci's curation (as with the Venice Biennale example) suggests both an inclusivity of artistic inspiration, and the influence of other artistic practices on the company's own performance work. Thus, it seems that Castellucci is suggesting a context for Società Raffaello Sanzio's performance practice that is distinct from (though complementary to) a socio-political or historical context, situating the company's productions if not within a genre, then perhaps within a way of working or thinking.

Further to this point, it is also interesting to reflect on the idea that, though not the case in relation to the productions I will specifically discuss below, some of Società Raffaello Sanzio's earlier productions (during the late 1990s in particular) were accompanied by densely illustrated programmes.¹⁰ These programmes collected images, not of the shows specifically, but gatherings of other images that described – while appearing to say nothing of what they described (in the form of captions, analyses etc) – another sort of historical context for the theatre work which potentially then sat amongst the images in the programmes. For example, the catalogue accompanying *Genesi, from the Museum of Sleep* (1999) included an image of a destroyed synagogue in Berlin after *Kristallnacht*, a nationwide anti-Jewish attack by

¹⁰ I refer in particular to the programmes for *Giulio Cesare* (1997) and *Genesi, from the Museum of Sleep* (1999), which I have seen, though I did not see the productions in question. The programmes for *Tragedia Endogonidia* (Brussels episode (Samuel Beckett Centre, Dublin in October 2003), *La Divina Commedia* (Barbican Centre, London, in April 2009), *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (Barbican Centre, London April 2011) and *The Four Seasons Restaurant* (Theatre de la Ville, Paris, April 2013) have not included external images. All programmes for these performances have included images from the productions, essays and programme notes by key members of the company and other writers (Nicholas Ridout and Piersandra Di Matteo in particular), some of which are referred to throughout this chapter.

German Nazi officials in November 1938. This photograph is placed alongside images of medical experiments performed on gypsy children by Nazi officials.

Matthew Causey's description of the piece notes that it

abstractly represents Madame Curie's discovery of radium against Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Holocaust against children at play, and Cain and Abel against each other...a world where within each creative action lies a potential or virtual ruinous possibility or inevitability.¹¹

This brief example allows for the suggestion that Societas Raffaello Sanzio's self-constructed context also speaks to a notion of a wider historical context for their work, which will be explored below. Nevertheless, such an exploration of the company's curatorial work presents an additional and alternative way of thinking about context to the examples presented in earlier chapters. It is possible to note that this emphasis potentially articulates the same questions of the validity of authorial intent as a methodological tool as the investigation of Ibsen's writing of *Peer Gynt*. However, it remains the case that the context the work describes for itself, or the context in which Castellucci has situated the company's work, is for me a significant part of the contemporary mode of historicisation. Further to this, an exploration below of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work in the context of a post-Holocaust historical (and theatrical-historical) time attempts to expand on the notion of the work's context in a manner more similar to that used in the previous two chapters.

Post-Holocaust representation and fragmenting the unstageable

In an extraordinary and relentless analysis of four photographic images taken secretly in 1944 by a Jewish inmate of the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp,

¹¹ Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 128.

Georges Didi-Huberman suggests an antithesis to Theodor Adorno's assertion that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.¹² One of the central claims of Didi-Huberman's work, *Images in Spite of All*, is a response to the notion of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust, or the impossibility of imagining what an adequate representation or image could be of an unimaginable subject.¹³ To take a well-known example of the artistic realisation of this idea, Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film, *Shoah*, a documentary consisting of interviews with Holocaust survivors and footage filmed during visits to some of the Polish concentration camps in the 1970s, does not directly show the gas chambers in which inmates of the camps were murdered. As Robert Faurisson notes,

the sudden, ever-so-brief appearance of the so-called gas chamber, almost pitch dark, can only be noticed by a specialist. The unprepared viewer might believe that Lanzmann has clearly shown him a gas chamber. This is pure sleight of hand.¹⁴

And yet, posits Didi-Huberman, despite textual and visual declarations of the impossibility of representation of the Holocaust, images taken of and from the 'unimaginable' place have survived, a moment of contact with the time and place, of 'contact with the real'.¹⁵ With this in mind, he urges the reader not to 'invoke the unimaginable' in thinking or talking about representations of the Holocaust, for in doing so we relegate it to the arena of the unsayable/unthinkable/unrepresentable, and move increasingly far away from beginning to understand what happened in terms of

¹² Theodor Adorno, 'Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 17-34, 34.

¹³ Adorno's declaration is also supported by Hayden White's description of the Holocaust as 'virtually unrepresentable in language'. Hayden White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. by Saul Friedlander (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 43.

¹⁴ Robert Faurisson, 'Shoah: Review', *The Journal of Historical Review*, 8:1 (1988), 82-91, 84.

¹⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, trans. by Shane B. Lilis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 180.

representation.¹⁶ He appears to acknowledge the significant difficulties attached to the idea of what such representations of the Holocaust might look like or involve, but, ‘in spite of our own inability to look at [the images] as they deserve’, exhorts us to try.¹⁷ Additionally, Didi-Huberman concedes the dubious power of these specific images and the fetishized status they could potentially acquire. With this in mind, he notes that they are ‘neither pure illusion nor all of the truth’, but that in any case they present an obligation to attempt to make some movement beyond the notion that the Holocaust is unrepresentable, as suggested by Adorno’s famous quote.¹⁸

For me, Didi-Huberman’s particular take on this aspect of a post-Holocaust ethics of representation suggests a contemporary historical context around which Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work can be situated, particularly in terms of a discussion of the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge, fragmented, in some examples drawn from the company’s recent pieces. Looking at these pieces in this particular context, informed by the discussion of Didi-Huberman above, Societas Raffaello Sanzio could

¹⁶ Didi-Huberman, p. 3.

¹⁷ Didi-Huberman, p. 3.

¹⁸ Didi-Huberman, p. 80. Didi-Huberman, in this work, is also taking on Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the *Muselmann*. The photographer in this case was a member of the *Sonderkommando*, squads of inmates of the camps who, from July 1942, were forced to work at the gas chambers, clearing and cremating bodies after the mass executions, and maintaining the chambers themselves. This horrific task culminated in their own deaths, and their replacement by the next *Sonderkommando*. These men are described by Agamben as *Muselmanner*, and for him are the only ‘complete’ witnesses of the Holocaust (though Agamben uses only the term ‘Auschwitz’), because their testimony is ‘untestifiable, that to which no one has borne witness’. Agamben goes on to compare the impossibility of *Muselmann*’s unbearable experience with the victim of the stare of the ancient Greek mythological Gorgon: ‘That at the “bottom” of the human being there is nothing other than an impossibility of seeing – this is the Gorgon, whose vision transforms the human being into a non-human... The Gorgon and he who has seen her and the *Muselmann* and he who bears witness to him are one gaze; they are a single impossibility of seeing’. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 54. Didi-Huberman acknowledges Agamben’s argument, but notes that ‘we cannot... learn anything from a paralyzed and petrified gaze’ (p. 179). For Didi-Huberman, what can be gained from an engagement with the myth of the Gorgon is the lesson of Perseus’s defeat of Medusa (the mortal part of the Gorgon) in spite of the perceived impossibility of doing so. He notes that, in this case, ‘[t]he initial impotent fatalism (“one cannot look at the Medusa”) is replaced by the *ethical response* (well, I will confront the Medusa all the same, by looking at her *differently*)’ (p. 179, author’s emphasis).

be said to align their work with the notion that to label something (an historical event, a historical figure, a human body, an animal, an object) as unstageable and assigns it too easily to the realm of that which is unthinkable or unimaginable, leaving it unstaged as well as unimagined. This presents an opportunity for an interesting observation about the work of the audience of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's performances, and how this work emerges from the audience's own particular context. Specific examples of this spectatorship will be discussed below, but it is worth noting at this point that a twenty-first century theatre audience, perhaps sharing the Adornian view of unrepresentability after the Holocaust, might not subscribe to a theatrical reading of Didi-Huberman's call to 'that oppressive imaginable', might not understand the images being dragged to the place of looking in an effort to 'contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them'.¹⁹

Thus, having suggested the above contexts as ways of situating Societas Raffaello Sanzio's practice, it is conceivable to discuss particular examples of the company's recent work in terms of the possibilities of the unstageable. Looking at the above examination of the specific context of the work, it is clear that it operates in a different way to similar work done in previous case study chapters. Consequently, exploring the possibilities of the unstageable in relation to Societas Raffaello Sanzio presents an additional point of contrast with the chapters on *Peer Gynt* and the Grand-Guignol. Here, I aim to articulate the notion that thinking about unstageability in a contemporary context begins to tend towards a fragmentation of the understanding of unstageability that I have explored so far. This has already been suggested in earlier chapters in discussions of twenty-first century iterations of the case study examples.

¹⁹ Didi-Huberman, p. 3.

In both cases, it was noted that the possibilities of the unstageable significantly altered when the theatrical-historical context changed to the twenty-first century. Thus, it is possible to conjecture that the examination below of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work, informed by the contextual positioning suggested above, may lead to an understanding of contemporary unstageability as incomplete and disjointed.

Though the notion of the fragmentation of the unstageable when considered in twenty-first century contexts may seem paradoxical, I have found over the course of my research that this could be seen as closely related to many of the paradoxes already associated with theatre and performance. For example, much of the theatre we see balances itself on the paradoxical basis that we (as audience) are watching someone on the stage, who purports not to be aware that we are watching them. Often, we find ourselves looking at a theatre stage into which another place, a kitchen, a university professor's office, a desolate wasteland, has been inserted. Another of the conventional theatre's paradoxical cornerstones, suspension of disbelief, expects that we simultaneously acknowledge that the kitchen / office / wasteland is both 'real' in the world of the play, and 'pretend' in the greater scheme of things. In this chapter, one of the fundamental paradoxes of the field supports my work. Peggy Phelan refers to this, in the introduction to *The Ends of Performance*, as

the lesson of performance itself – the ability to realize that which is not otherwise manifest. Performative writing seeks to extend the oxymoronic possibilities of animating the unlive that lies at the heart of performance as a making.²⁰

I have noted that Phelan refers to this 'lesson of performance' as an oxymoron and not a paradox. The difference, like other term-based definitions in this thesis, is subtle but

²⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.

significant. If an oxymoron is ‘a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction’, and a paradox is ‘a statement or proposition that, despite sound reasoning...leads to a conclusion that seems senseless’, then it seems that there is an argument for either term to operate in relation to Phelan’s statement.²¹

‘Animating the unlived’ certainly shows two contradictory terms appearing in conjunction, but for me they also add up to a sound and reasonable proposition with a potentially senseless conclusion. With this in mind, I venture to utilize Phelan’s words here as a support for the fragmentation of the unstageable, an understanding of a sort of failure, this ‘animation of the unlived’, as an affirmative and even inherent part of theatre and performance. Realising that which is not otherwise manifest is arguably not only the lesson, but the task, the aim, the result, of most creative work. For example, in dramatic literature, a play tends to originate in the imagination of the playwright, and the action of putting words on the page amounts to realising something which would otherwise not be manifest. Equally, mounting a production of that same play realises an otherwise unrealised thing. Of course, this idea is no less true of work for which no conventional text or script exists. The creative act, regardless of its basis in text, amounts to what is essentially, as Phelan puts it, an oxymoron. Realising the otherwise unrealisable. Staging the otherwise unstageable.

Combining Phelan’s ‘lesson of performance’ with Jacques Rancière’s question about the conditions under which it might be said that certain events cannot be represented, it seems that the former’s discussion of performance as a realisation of ‘that which is not otherwise manifest’ presents an interesting support for the latter’s critique of Jean-

²¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com> [13 January 2012].

François Lyotard's 'fact that there is an unrepresentable'.²² In 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' Rancière discusses Lyotard's argument in *The Inhuman* that there is 'some original unthinkable phenomenon resistant to any dialectical assimilation', noting Lyotard's extension of Adorno's assertion about the impossibility of art after the Holocaust, which suggests this impossibility in terms of an 'art of the unrepresentable'.²³ However, for Rancière, Lyotard's articulation of the unrepresentable as a failure of artistic presentation should instead be thought of as 'a success of negative presentation', and, turning to his own term, 'unrepresentable', an observance of the idea that, if there is an unrepresentable, it 'can only be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it'.²⁴ In this, Rancière returns to the answering of part of his titular question, stating that '[n]othing is unrepresentable as a property of the event. There are simply choices'.²⁵

Returning to Phelan, it can be suggested that the 'animation of the unlive', and the 'realization of that which is not otherwise manifest' are ideas that align themselves with Rancière's statement that '[e]verything is equal, equally representable', though Phelan directs her assertion to performance making specifically, and Rancière his to art more generally.²⁶ Additionally, discussing Rancière's 'literal unrepresentable' in terms of the kinds of unstageability that have been examined so far in this thesis, particularly regarding the theatrically-specific context of a shift from one regime to another, around which the possibilities of the unstageable have been shown to emerge, it follows that a contemporary examination of unstageability is less

²² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 101.

²³ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 134.

²⁴ Rancière, p. 129.

²⁵ Rancière, p. 138.

²⁶ Rancière, p. 120.

straightforward than Rancière's example of Corneille's *Oedipe*, as discussed in the previous chapter.²⁷

With this in mind, I am using the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio as a case study in this chapter in a way that has encouraged my thinking about the contemporary unstageable and how its possibilities might be said to emerge. Drawing on a particular sense of post-Holocaust notions of representation as articulated by Didi-Huberman, I will explore some of the ways in which Societas Raffaello Sanzio's recent work could be said to align with a certain fragmentation of the unstageable in the post-Holocaust moment. Furthermore, a thinking through of Rancière's articulation of the literal unrepresentable, the gap between what we see and what we understand on the stage that disrupts 'a suitable relationship between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, the expected and the unexpected', presents some interesting links with Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work, particularly in the pieces with which the rest of this chapter is concerned.

Societas Raffaello Sanzio

This introduction of Societas Raffaello Sanzio is the sort of writing that is cautioned against by Kelleher and Ridout in their introduction to *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio*. They discuss biographical information in terms of its 'sufficiency' as a framework, reminding their readers that the chronicling of such facts 'is never at any level the point of the work'.²⁸ While I understand their warning, especially in the context of a book that discusses a particular period in the lifespan of a theatre

²⁷ Rancière, p. 115.

²⁸ Castellucci and others, p. 5.

company, my thesis' logical structure depends on a marking of time and place. The synchronic approach to a discussion of unstageability, reliant as it must be on the examination of the possibilities of the unstageable in particular historical and theatrical-historical contexts, necessitates such situating of each example, as I have attempted above. Additionally, in relation to an acknowledgement of a particular theatrical space, as with the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the previous chapter, Societas Raffaello Sanzio have long been associated with a specific space, though the rapid turnover of artistic directors at the Grand-Guignol is not the case here.

According to Alan Read's chapter on Romeo Castellucci in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, and the 'Theatography' at the back of *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio*, the first production associated with Societas Raffaello Sanzio took place in November 1980, at a private apartment in Rome.²⁹ Its title was *Cenno*, and it would appear to have featured Romeo Castellucci and his sister Claudia Castellucci, along with another pair of siblings, Chiara and Paolo Guidi, all in their very early twenties. The 'Theatography' winds its way through the 1980s, showing Societas Raffaello Sanzio's appearance at a variety of Italian venues and festivals. The first mention of the Teatro Commandini in Cesena is in late 1991. This is the space that has been associated with Societas Raffaello Sanzio ever since. In *Bodycheck: Relocating the Body in Contemporary Performing Art*, an interview with Romeo Castellucci, conducted in 1998 by the editors of the volume, is preceded by a paragraph of biographical information. In this, the same space is said to have been 'renamed "La Casa del Bello Estremo" (The House of the Beautiful Extreme)' by the

²⁹ Alan Read, 'Romeo Castellucci: The director on this earth', in Maria Delgado and Dan Rebellato eds., *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 261; Castellucci and others, p. 270

company, though I have found no corroboration to this thus far.³⁰ Over a decade after *Cenno*, Societas Raffaello Sanzio found a permanent home, and a permanent trio of co-founders was established. From then until now, Romeo Castellucci, Claudia Castellucci, and Chiara Guidi have remained at the core of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, along with their frequent collaborator Scott Gibbons, an American sound designer and composer, who has designed sound and composed music for most of the company's pieces under discussion here. The pieces specifically discussed in this chapter include *BR.#04*, the Brussels episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia*; and *Purgatorio*, the second part of the trilogy inspired by Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. These productions will be introduced and examined in due course, and descriptions of the works will combine my own notes from watching the performances with others' accounts that I have read. In both cases, I hope to articulate the notion, suggested above, that Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work articulates a particular relationship with the possibilities of the unstageable, especially when considered through a post-Holocaust lens. With this lens in mind, and following from Didi-Huberman, it seems that a consideration of a particular image as unstageable is a notion that requires more thought (and work) than simply naming it as such.

Tragedia Endogonidia: BR.#04

Between 2002 and 2004, Societas Raffaello Sanzio developed a cycle of theatre pieces exploring the idea of tragedy in various cities around Europe. The resulting eleven-episode production was entitled *Tragedia Endogonidia*. Perhaps translatable as 'Endogenous Tragedy' in English, this title calls to mind the biological term

³⁰ Maaïke Bleeker and others, *Bodycheck: Relocating the Body in Contemporary Performing Art* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 217.

‘endogenous’, denoting something that grows or originates from within itself.

Supporting this definition in *The Theatre of Societàs Raffaello Sanzio*, Romeo

Castellucci writes that

the word is adapted from the vocabulary of microbiology; it refers to those simple living beings with two sets of sexual organs inside themselves that are able to reproduce continually, without need of another, according to what amounts, effectively, to a system of immortality.³¹

Castellucci notes the inherent contradiction in the juxtaposition of these two titular words. In tragedy, we often expect a downfall or destruction, and some sort of finality. For a tragedy to be endogenous, therefore, is at odds with a way of presenting that, traditionally, ‘presupposes the inevitable ruin of whoever comes up against the splendour of the hero’s solitude, which, soon enough, has its own death for an horizon’.³² I note the etymology of the title here because of the relevance of such specificity to the topic at hand. In discussing contemporary aspects of unstageability and its fragmentation in the work of Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, it has been important to examine what such a fragmenting of the possibilities of the unstageable might entail in relation to what has been explored in the previous two case studies. I have attempted to align the particular kinds of unstageability highlighted in each of the two previous chapters with a specific examination of the historical and theatrical-historical contexts at hand. This recalls, firstly, Rancière’s attention to time in terms of literal unrepresentability when he notes that ‘what had passed for miraculous in those long-ago times would seem horrible in our age’.³³ Additionally, the notion that the possibilities of the unstageable could be said to emerge in a shift in artistic practice and/or historical situation had provided a way of exploring these possibilities further

³¹ Castellucci and others, p. 31.

³² Castellucci and others, p. 31.

³³ Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, trans. by D. Keates and J. Swenson (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 12.

in terms of context. Finally, I have noted already the different ways in which this chapter's work operates in terms of contextual specificity and the changing observation of the unstageable in a post-Holocaust context. With this in mind, Castellucci's assertion of the contradiction central to the work's title chimes with this chapter's paradoxical premise, that the fragmentation of the unstageable is discernible in this particular context.

To return to the details of this first example from Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work, following initial periods of creation and production in the cities of Cesena, Avignon, Berlin, Brussels, Bergen, Paris, Rome, Strasbourg, London, and Marseilles, *Tragedia Endogonidia* subsequently toured the world, shifting and adapting various parts of each episode as new cities became part of the project. The fourth episode, *BR.#04*, was created in Brussels in May 2003 and then transferred to the Dublin Theatre Festival, where I saw it in the Samuel Beckett Theatre in September of that year. In this section of the chapter, I will be exploring two images from this production, and discussing them in terms of how the unstageable is absent due to the staging, as articulated above.

In order to describe the first image, which comes from the start of the piece, in as immediate a fashion as possible, I have transcribed my own notes from watching the production.

Lights up on a baby downstage left. The set is a brightly-lit, white box that looks like it is made of marble. Fluorescent lights hang down, suspended on silver wires. A white head-and-shoulders shape about three feet high is upstage right. It 'watches' the baby; it begins to 'speak' in a mechanical voice. The baby, unperturbed, crawls out into the darkness of the auditorium. A woman in the front row (definitely not planted) picks up the baby as it reaches her, holds it on her lap for a moment before passing it to a man sitting beside

her. A woman dressed in black whom we have already seen appears from offstage, picks up the baby and exits to offstage left.

These notes can be supplemented by material from *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio*, as the chapter about *BR.#04* consists of a collection of production notes entitled 'The evening works like this'; letters between Scott Gibbons and Chiara Guidi; a descriptive and analytical section by Joe Kelleher with sub-headings including 'Storytime', 'Infant', 'Police', and 'Legend'; and a more philosophical piece of writing by Nicholas Ridout, harking back to the previous three parts of *Tragedia Endogonidia*, set in Cesena, Avignon, and Berlin, and anticipating the performance in Bergen that would follow the Brussels piece.³⁴ Additionally, a chapter in Matthew Causey's *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* includes a discussion of *BR.#04*, based on the Dublin performances of the Brussels episodes.³⁵ For example, Kelleher's discussion of the baby on the stage creates an interesting dialogue with the idea of a fragmentation of the possibilities of the unstageable in Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work here. He notes that the baby 'does not appear born but put or left there...some lump of actual humanity caught in the gob of the theatre's storytelling machinery'.³⁶

This description, for me, connects to a sense of the disappearance of the unstageable, or an attempt not to relegate a theatrical image to a place of unstageability, to follow from Didi-Huberman's work. For me, this is perceptible through some aspects of the image's staging, via a combination of two converging ideas surrounding theatrical representation. Firstly, this image displays a deep awareness that the spectator of such

³⁴ Castellucci and others, pp. 95-111.

³⁵ Causey, pp. 150-179.

³⁶ Castellucci and others, p. 96.

a scene, and of another image in *BR.#04* that will be discussed below, is part of a trajectory that is described by Societas Raffaello Sanzio as a ‘fall’ or a ‘crash’ into representation.³⁷ While I will discuss this idea in more detail below, it refers to the notion that, for example, despite the company’s assertion that ‘the baby mustn’t be made upset’ and that ‘[i]f the baby is NOT quiet and cries, then Romeo orders the closing of the curtain, and the baby will at once be taken by the mother who is waiting in the wings,’ nevertheless there remains a point at which the audience is taken over by an emotional reaction to what has been presented, a ‘real’ baby on the stage alone.³⁸ As a contradictory part of ‘theatre’s storytelling machinery’, this baby disrupts the ‘fall’ into representation that other images presented in the piece encourage. As Ridout puts it, ‘her appearance here is something of an anomaly’, referring to the fact that members of the audience in Brussels waved to the baby one night, and loudly suggested that her presence was inappropriate on another night.³⁹ For me, an interruption of the spectatorial ‘fall’ into representation suggests a fragmentation of the possibilities of the unstageable because the baby’s presence on the stage occurs regardless of theatre’s conventions at the time in which the piece is staged. As Kelleher continues, the baby represents ‘a gag of sorts, the gag of the little actor, around which the theatrical apparatus can only gesticulate like a rather ineffectual magistrate’.⁴⁰ Following on from this, the theatre may be struggling to deal with this ‘gag’, in a way that suggests a surpassing of theatrical limits, and perhaps an erosion of the possibilities of the unstageable.

³⁷ Castellucci and others, p. 219.

³⁸ Castellucci and others, pp. 90-2.

³⁹ Castellucci and others, p. 108.

⁴⁰ Castellucci and others, p. 96.

As well as the disrupted ‘fall’ into representation, it seems that a connection to Didi-Huberman’s sense of an obligation to the unimaginable could be observed in Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s staging of the baby in this piece. I venture that the staging of this particular image, and of some of the others that will feature in this chapter, presents a specific decision to stage something, as if the company are declaring that to attribute unstageability to the image of an (apparently) unaccompanied baby on a stage would be to ignore its stageability, and thus there could be a perceived responsibility to stage it. With this in mind, in terms of this chapter’s position, we see unstageability fragmented, almost ignored to an extent. As Ridout continues,

although the Brussels episode appeared at first encounter to be direct, straightforward, literal, even brazen in its obviousness, in retrospect it turns out to be much more slippery than any of its predecessors, its literalness a kind of lure.⁴¹

Another possible theorization of Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work in the context of this chapter discussing aspects of the fragmentation of the unstageable, is articulated by Josette Féral. She notes a sense that certain artists, mentioning Romeo Castellucci as an example, are moving ‘beyond representation by bringing reality onto the stage...introducing the spectacular...call[ing] upon a stage presence that abruptly seizes the audience and violently affects them’.⁴² As Féral’s article continues, a discussion about the real (as distinct from what Féral calls the theatrical) on the theatre stage develops, with specific reference to how this emergence of the real necessarily alters the relationship that the theatre piece has with its spectators. What I am particularly interested in, in the light of an examination of some of Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work in this thesis regarding the fragmentation of the possibilities

⁴¹ Castellucci and others, p. 105.

⁴² Josette Féral, ‘From Event to Extreme Reality: The Aesthetic of Shock’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 55:4 (2011), 51-63, 51.

of the unstageable in the twenty-first century, is Féral's allusion to a move beyond representation, and particularly her assertion that, in the case of such theatre work, 'the tacit contract initially existing between the artist and the spectator seems to suddenly disintegrate and the spectators find themselves forcibly propelled into a reality that seems to extend beyond the frame of the stage'.⁴³ Additionally, the idea that theatre spectators, through the act of spectating, would find themselves to be (figuratively) beyond the stage or the theatre space and into the reality from which they had, briefly, extricated themselves in order to spectate, approaches an analysis of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work that appeals to further thought in terms of the fragmented possibilities of the unstageable.

Continuing along the lines of Féral's discussion, it is possible to articulate this moment from *Tragedia Endogonidia* in relation to a fragmentation of the unstageable through its location in theatrical-historical context, as described above. I will aim to examine the idea that, in this moment of the emergence of the real, the unstageable is revoked, in a way. For me, if the real is presented where the theatrical was expected, this disruption of staging, or, as Féral would have it, 'an eruption in the course of the spectacle', renders a possible moment of unstageability nullified, and allows a discussion regarding a disruption of the possibilities of the unstageable to emerge.⁴⁴ Arguably, in a comparable way to Grieg's music for the 1876 premiere of *Peer Gynt* overflowing the boundaries of theatre while the play remained in the theatre; with Societas Raffaello Sanzio's piece, the real stepped in when the theatrical did not appear. In a sense, with this piece, the unstageable fragments because the real appears instead. The baby on the stage in the Brussels episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia*

⁴³ Féral, p. 54.

⁴⁴ Féral, p. 54.

articulates this sense of a fragmented unstageable in a most interesting manner. Here, far from a moment of audience participation, what seems in fact to be happening in this moment is the spectator's recognition that the baby is operating in the real world, and not in the theatrical one. The spectator is, perhaps, moved to recall their own real world, prompted by the baby's unapologetic and emphatic occupation within it, and, in Féral's terms, is propelled out of the theatre. Indeed, with further thinking through this aspect of the fragmented unstageable specifically from the departing spectator's point of view below, it will be shown that, perhaps, an anticipation of the unstageable becomes active in the decision to leave the theatre space.

The second image from *BR.#04* that I will address comes from the second half of the piece. Its description below, like the description of the baby placed on the stage in the first scene, combines my own notes with descriptions I have read. To begin with, I will analyse this image in terms of a 'fall' into representation. A moment in which, as Joe Kelleher ventures, 'something breaks through the mimesis' - despite many theatrical markers that specify a performing (and spectating) of something that is representation - is a potentially interesting ground for discussion of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's particular relationship with the possibilities of unstageability.⁴⁵ Indeed, as Kelleher suggests in a description of another piece from the *Tragedia Endogonia* cycle, the breaking of something through the mimetic barrier, through the distance between the stage and auditorium, might be thought to be preceded by 'some sort of pressure at work in the image itself'.⁴⁶ The building of this pressure within the image is perhaps a pressure of its stageability, its staging for the spectators 'while we

⁴⁵ Joe Kelleher, 'The Suffering of Images', in Adrian Heathfield ed. *Live: Art and Performance* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), p. 194.

⁴⁶ Kelleher, p. 192.

demand of [it] that [it] makes a case for [itself]', recalling again Didi-Huberman's post-Holocaust articulation of a need to contemplate that which was thought to be unimaginable.⁴⁷ This pressure manifests itself in Kelleher's example in a trickle of stage blood down the back of a woman on the stage, 'as if...her body were answering back, throwing out a signal'.⁴⁸ The example that I will explore now also looks at stage blood as an indicator of what could be thought of as a rupture of mimesis, but additionally, I aim to suggest that a fall into representation in this instance has something to do with a fragmentation of unstageability, and arguably even a denial that there is such a thing in a consideration of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's twenty-first century theatre practice.

A man, dressed as a policeman, enters the doorless, windowless, white marble space of the stage, a five-sided cube, the sixth side of which consists of the dark auditorium. He produces a small bottle of dark-red liquid and carefully pours it out onto the floor. He then marks some points on the floor with lettered pieces of folded card. The liquid is recognisable as stage blood, and the cards might suggest the work done by forensic teams when examining the scene of a violent incident, images recalled perhaps from the news or from various murder mystery dramas on television. In the audience, I wonder if the next step in this playing-out of some kind of corpse-less reconstruction will be to draw where the outline of the body would have been on the floor, another familiar feature of the crime scene. Perhaps we feel somewhat uncomfortable that we know so much of this routine and have not much emotional connection with it. Perhaps we feel secure in our recognition of what is taking place here, even if the order of events seems somewhat back-to-front. However, instead of the chalky outline

⁴⁷ Kelleher, p. 192.

⁴⁸ Kelleher, p. 192.

that might be expected, two further policemen enter. One of them strips to his underwear and lies down in the pool of blood created by his colleague moments before. The other two policemen, with truncheons, begin systematically to mime a very thorough and methodical beating of the third. Each mimed gesture is accompanied by an unusual and unnatural whacking sound, ringing out around the auditorium at a hugely amplified volume, ‘accelerating into a nauseous crescendo mixed with interference’.⁴⁹

The duration of this incessant battering is unclear. What is clear, however, is that, quite apart from the noise, the audience begin to find the witnessing of this prolonged scene more and more difficult to do, perhaps in part because it is a struggle to ascertain its duration. Matthew Causey suggests that ‘[t]he beating continues for nearly five minutes’, while Nicholas Ridout estimates in his discussion of the image that it ‘felt like’ fifteen minutes, which neatly captures the inability to perceive the duration, and Joe Kelleher, examining the same scene, describes it as ‘interminable’.⁵⁰ Apart from the incessant sense of the scene in terms of time, its interminability for the spectator is also striking. Ridout notes that the beating is ‘unusually intense and difficult to endure’, and Causey mentions that the audience, its numbers slightly depleted after the scene, ‘remained in what seemed a rather stunned silence’.⁵¹

Following from this sense of the length of the scene, it is interesting to note a comparison between the spectators leaving the theatre after watching this particular image, and those who had already left during the first image I described, the baby on

⁴⁹ Castellucci and others, p. 100.

⁵⁰ Causey, p. 173; Castellucci and others, p. 104; Castellucci and others, p. 100.

⁵¹ Castellucci and others, p. 104; Causey, p. 175.

the stage. Working as part of the front-of-house team at the Dublin performances, to which Causey refers in his discussion of the piece, I was struck by the tendency of audience members to leave the Samuel Beckett Theatre not during the beating, but after it. At this point, the victim is put into a black plastic bag, and, as a microphone is placed near to where his mouth would be, he begins to speak. It seems that the decision of the audience to leave at this moment could have something to do with the theatricality of this image's construction, its very staging. Ridout, in an examination of the theatricality of this long beating scene, suggests that 'the sustained shock of the simulated violence demands a particular attention for the action itself...[a] shorter scene could, perhaps, have sustained its fabric of theatrical illusion intact'.⁵² Pushing Ridout's point in another direction, it could perhaps be suggested that the audience's attention, 'demanded' of them by the long beating scene as he indicates, is only released to them at its end, and so a decision to leave the theatre can only be taken at that point.

Additionally, though speculatively, an analysis of this moment of spectators' departure can link to a sense of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's denial or refusal to label a theatrical image as unstageable, leading to the fragmentation of the possibilities of the unstageable when their recent work is considered. If the audience left after the beating and not before, perhaps this waiting to leave could be read in terms of an acknowledgement of this work. For example, consider Rancière's example of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and its literal unrepresentability on the French stage of Corneille's time when '[t]oo much is shown to the spectator'.⁵³ Far from referring to the incest storyline of the play, or to the gouged-out eyes with which Oedipus appears

⁵² Castellucci and others, p. 106.

⁵³ Rancière, 2009, p. 16.

at its end, for Rancière the unrepresentability of the play in the mid-seventeenth century lies in the relationship between what is seen by or said to the spectator and what is understood by them, a relationship that he describes as defective. It is not that the spectators' sensibilities would be affected, but that the 'order of the representative system that gives dramatic creation its rule' is disrupted.⁵⁴ Returning to the audience in Dublin at *BR.#04*, it seems that the arrangement is untroubled, but that this organised order of representation, much like 'the act of our witnessing these actions, or images of actions' is purposeful.⁵⁵ Thus, if there is something called unstageable in contemporary practice, here it might be a concept that could, as it were, step in and prevent this interminable image of an action from being staged. I do not intend to anthropomorphise unstageability, only to suggest that it might operate, in the case of *BR.#04*, almost as some kind of threshold. Società Raffaello Sanzio, in their refusal of the unstageable, perhaps allow for its anticipation, but not its culmination.

The makers of *BR.#04* present an interesting articulation of the image's theatricality and its effect on the spectator. In a group discussion of this particular scene in *The Theatre of Società Raffaello Sanzio*, Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, and Chiara Guidi suggest that it is precisely because the workings of the theatrical machine are revealed that we, the audience, are somehow duped, infusing the moment with a kind of naturalism that was never attached to it by its creators. Each of them in turn declares that this moment embodies a moving away from spectacle, though paradoxically using the very nature of spectacle in order to do so. For me, this suggests a link to the idea of refusing the unstageable by staging. Romeo Castellucci deals succinctly with the idea that exposing the device in this way is an inherent

⁵⁴ Rancière, 2009, p. 18.

⁵⁵ Castellucci and others, p. 105.

criticism of its fundamental role on the stage. He mentions that ‘if you make it clear that the bottle [of fake blood] is evidently a piece of reality, that shows that you renounce the mechanism of the spectacle’.⁵⁶ Claudia Castellucci, noting the classical function of representation in the theatre as a mirror-image for the audience of various aspects of their own lives, recalls the shift that takes place, not only between what we have been told and what we begin to feel, but between what we are used to seeing and what has been presented in *BR.#04*. In what she describes as ‘formulaic’ terms, Castellucci explains how ‘the theatre, which was the spectacle of reality, now, in a certain sense, is the reality of the spectacle, shows the spectacle, becomes the reality of the spectacle’.⁵⁷ Finally, Guidi adds a question to the many that have been piling up in the effort to analyse this scene, and tries to suggest some reasons as to the emotional response to such logical explanation. She discusses the moment in terms of a communication of information to the audience, a deliberate leading of the spectator down a path of meaning, without warning them that feelings could take over. She recognises that

[t]he idea is not in the original communication which was the opening of the bottle [of fake blood], but neither is it in the literal representation of a beating, so where is the idea? It is in the fact that the public, at the end of all this, says, have mercy, the theatre has taken me in.⁵⁸

So, we have been ‘taken in’, but the reason for this is still puzzling. There is a slippage between what we know and have been told and shown, and what we feel. As Guidi continues,

my mind has not been able to react to this image with the same cool and lucidity with which I said look, let us open the bottle, let’s empty it on the floor. I am sliding, I’ve fallen into representation, but not by a logical route

⁵⁶ Castellucci and others, p. 218.

⁵⁷ Castellucci and others, p. 218.

⁵⁸ Castellucci and others, p. 218.

which was the logic of opening the bottle. I have crashed emotionally into a representation that has neither narrative nor logical context.⁵⁹

Romeo Castellucci, in a comparison between their work and conventional mainstream films, where naturalism is the order of the day, and the constructedness of the scenes is not revealed, certainly never in a manner as blatant as in the scene from *BR.#04*, mentions that ‘Mel Gibson hides the bottle’.⁶⁰ Instead of hiding it, Societàs Raffaello Sanzio offer the bottle to the spectator in order to ‘communicate information to the audience’.⁶¹ However, as Guidi mentions, the spectators let the representation take them over, in spite of themselves, in spite of each of the many reminders that this is not a naturalistic representation.

Regarding this thesis chapter, the discussion between the founders of Societàs Raffaello Sanzio about the ‘fall’ into representation points towards some interesting conclusions about the refusal of unstageability in the company’s work in the early twenty-first century. It seems that, in perhaps a comparable way to the audiences during the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol’s more popular period, the audiences at *BR.#04* are taken over by the representation on the stage. However, where the Grand-Guignol audiences in the early twentieth century fainted or vomited at the realistic representations of violence, the Societàs Raffaello Sanzio audiences at this particular piece are affected by the visible artifice of ‘these images of actions’, as Ridout puts it.⁶² As has been suggested above, this visible artifice and the audience’s response could be thought of in terms of the staged refusal of the unstageable in *BR.#04*, a ‘crash’ into an illogical representative context, the interminability of which is not

⁵⁹ Castellucci and others, p. 219.

⁶⁰ Castellucci and others, p. 218.

⁶¹ Castellucci and others, p. 218.

⁶² Castellucci and others, p. 105.

relieved by any sense that it might instead be considered unstageable by this company. An exploration of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Purgatorio*, to which I will now turn, presents another example of an image 'maintain[ing] conditions appropriate to its continuation', as Alan Read describes the atmosphere of the piece.⁶³

Purgatorio

In a thesis that discusses possibility and supposition, I can perhaps begin a section examining Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Purgatorio* with a more concrete statement. We do not know for certain what happens after we die. Various religions subscribe to various hypotheses surrounding this subject, from re-incarnation to ascension into heaven, allowing for forms of certainty to exist for those who believe in them. Similarly, reports of 'near-death experiences', claiming evidence for what happens once the mortal body stops working, have created another strand of hypotheses, and perhaps another type of certainty. In the Roman Catholic doctrine, Purgatory is an afterlife space, or state, of torment and suffering. Sinners who have not repented of their sins before their deaths, atone for them in Purgatory, before eventually ascending into heaven. Examining this idea in relation to the *Purgatorio* in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Societas Raffaello Sanzio appear to have another interpretation of the purgatorial plane. As Claudia Castellucci puts it in the production's programme note, 'The need for consolation (Notes on *Purgatorio*)',

Purgatory is not a place where a son seeks atonement while waiting to be welcomed into Paradise; rather it is a place where a father manifests the disaster of his own self-made power and, while grappling with the desire to free himself, attempts to evoke pity from his own son.⁶⁴

⁶³ Read, p. 255.

⁶⁴ Claudia Castellucci, 'The need for consolation (Notes on *Purgatorio*)', *Purgatorio* Playbill, Barbican Centre, London (2008).

Attempting to reflect on the complexity of this statement in light of Società Raffaello Sanzio's *Purgatorio*, I find some parallels with *BR.#04*, particularly in relation to the notion of a 'fall' into representation, and the implications this has for the possibilities of the unstageable, and their fragmentation in a twenty-first century context. As already discussed above, if the possibilities of the unstageable in Società Raffaello Sanzio's work are examined in terms of Didi-Huberman's suggestion that we be called to 'that oppressive imaginable' and to 'take on' images that seem impossible to comprehend, then the nature and content of the staging that occurs becomes the focal point of such an examination. This short section of the chapter will describe and analyse two of the central images of *Purgatorio*, following on from the work done with *BR.#04* above.

Purgatorio premiered at the Avignon Festival in the summer of 2008, in the Parc des Expositions on the outskirts of the city. I saw it in April 2009 in the Barbican Centre, London, and my description below comes from notes made during and directly after the performance, supported by descriptions of the Avignon production that I have read. *Purgatorio* opens with a domestic interior scene, a stage contained within a box set and further framed with a scrim cloth between the audience and the performer. A woman washes dishes at the sink and prepares a meal, and a boy, her son, plays with a toy at the kitchen table. Tablets are administered to him by his mother, with the gentle chide, spoken in French and translated via surtitles projected onto the centre of the scrim, 'Take your medicine'. These projected phrases, will, shortly, also describe what is happening on the stage, as well as what is not. In this first scene, it is also noticeable that the sounds of drying dishes, of chopping vegetables, of swallowing pills, are amplified slightly. As Alan Read puts it in his description of the same scene,

this amplification ‘is instantly recognisable as such and confirms we are still sentient beings whose sense of being alive is precisely calibrated through the registration of such niceties’.⁶⁵ This recognisable adjustment of reality, or its representation, coupled with the boy’s repeated question, ‘Is he coming home tonight?’, indicates that this seemingly calm space of domestic routine may not remain so.

The father’s arrival home, and what appears to be a domestic routine of a glass of whiskey and a re-heated meal in front of the television, builds towards him asking his wife for ‘the hat’ in an intimate moment. While, in French, this noun could be either a hat or a condom, the appearance of the father’s cowboy hat, and his wife’s reaction to the announcement that he will play ‘Cowboys and Indians’ with his young son, suggest that the father’s intentions towards his child are not playful. The father and son remain offstage during the next scene, but the rape of the child by the father is staged aurally, as will be explored further below. During this scene of offstage shouts and moans, the surtitles on the scrim, which have projected translations of the spoken and unspoken action on the stage so far, set up an alternative, virtual scene, not visible on stage. These stage directions, which, as the father ascends the staircase, disengage from the action on the stage and portray a different course of action. In this other scene, described via the surtitles, the father puts on some music and the family dances together. Pausing on the words ‘the music’, a phrase which remains projected onto the scrim for much of the scene, a certain separation between the action on (and off) the stage, and the alternative space set up by the surtitles, becomes clear.

⁶⁵ Read, p. 256.

Returning from offstage, the father still wears the cowboy hat, which he removes when he sits at a piano on the stage. Revealing a newly bald head, and then peeling off what appears to be a latex mask, he rests the backs of his hands on the piano's keyboard and music starts to play. Read's description announces this piece of music to be Arvo Pärt's *Für Alina*.⁶⁶ Slowly, the boy too returns to the stage, barefoot now, his jacket awry. He goes to his father, takes his right hand from the piano keys and guides the right arm to hang by his side. Finally, the boy climbs into his father's lap and puts his arms around him as the music continues to play. As Read notes, 'he can fill the ensuing bars not with forgiveness – this is Purgatory – but with tenderness', and eventually the scene is hidden from our view with the descent of a curtain.⁶⁷

The final part of *Purgatorio*, which my analysis will not cover in great detail, shows the boy looking through a porthole at large, billowing, distorted objects beyond, reminiscent of the first episode of this trio of pieces, *Inferno*. A tangled forest comes into view, and the boy's father is seen emerging from it. After another curtain drop and raise, we see the living area from the previous part of the piece, now completely bare of furniture. A black, disc-shaped contraption is lowered to downstage centre, a lens through which we can watch the dance of a man and its observance by a younger man, who are dressed identically to the father and son characters that have previously appeared. The older man, another version of the father, dances to the cerebral palsy with which his body appears to us. As Read suggests in a note to his description of *Purgatorio*, this cerebral palsy, a disability in many other contexts, is here shown to us as perfect.⁶⁸ As the older man lies down and continues his dance, which culminates

⁶⁶ Read, p. 257.

⁶⁷ Read, p. 257.

⁶⁸ Read, p. 262.

in spasmodic, fitting movements, the younger man, a taller version of the son, lies down upon his father and takes on some of the spasms of this fit. Finally, black liquid falls upon the lens disc, which has started to spin. This liquid, spidery across the lens at first, eventually turns it completely black.

Purgatory, Read asserts, 'is cruel because it is not exceptional'.⁶⁹ He refers here, it seems, to a number of things. Firstly, the nature of the subject matter in *Purgatorio*, in whose awful ordinariness we have to recognise much of the everyday world. In the various episodes of *Tragedia Endogonidia*, there was frequently a historical figure at which to rage and blame, a 'Mussolini or Charles de Gaulle...to vent anger upon', but here in Purgatory, in the first section of *Purgatorio*, there are two male characters of a very different, unexceptional kind.⁷⁰ Read also alludes to '[t]his distended naturalism', and so, his assertion above could be connected to the idea that a sense of naturalistic representation, as discussed above in other chapters, is recognised as one of theatre's (though not one of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's) most stubborn conventions, and that it is not exceptional to see Naturalism at the theatre, however cruel the narrative on view might be.⁷¹ Finally, his discussion, following this comment, of the stage action that 'is destined to continue' in Castellucci's *Purgatorio* after the rape of the child, indicates that the cruel but unexceptional is perhaps a condition of the enduring torment of Purgatory, 'that it should maintain conditions appropriate to its continuation'.⁷² I would offer an appendix to Read's complex phrase in the light of this chapter's exploration of Societas Raffaello Sanzio and *Purgatorio*. For me, there is an exceptional quality to this piece that derives from its ability to

⁶⁹ Read, p. 257.

⁷⁰ Read, p. 257.

⁷¹ Read, p. 257.

⁷² Read, p. 255.

refuse the possibilities of the unstageable. As mentioned above, the staging of the rape, aurally and offstage, perhaps indicate an initial acknowledgement of this act as unstageable. Additionally, the staging of it on this unexceptional domestic set, surrounded by the trappings of realistic scenography, of naturalistic acting, recalls the specificity of time and place required by my earlier discussions of various unstageabilities in *Peer Gynt* and the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. The moments of unstageability in both of these examples relied on a backwards glance at their histories. Contrapuntally, the perceived moment of unstageability in *Purgatorio* in my own time is refused because it is staged. The possibilities of the unstageable fragment, because, as the conclusion to this chapter will continue to suggest, these possibilities are disjointed in observations of the particular context of this twenty-first century work. In the post-Holocaust world, it could be suggested, following Adorno (and Lanzmann), that there are unspeakable deeds that are unwatchable for some, and unbearable moments of unforgivable action. These impossibilities are, however, if Didi-Huberman's work is considered as it has been above, calling to be overcome, to be staged and watched.

Combining this with Jacques Rancière's sense of equal representability in 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', it seems that stageability in the twenty-first century is not so much an embrace of equal stageability as it is an imperative. Additionally, there is a sense that, amidst the twenty-first century logistical and technological capabilities of theatre and performance, the possibilities of unstageability fragment further. This is a speculative suggestion that will be returned to in the conclusion to this thesis. Until then, the work done in this chapter indicates that it is possible to deduce a certain refusal of unstageability in the moments of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work under

discussion in this chapter. For me, these are not just examinations of instances where something has been staged. Rather, they explore what it might mean to think about unstageability now, and how this might be illustrated by exploring staging, instead of not staging.

To return to the specific moment discussed in *Purgatorio*, Katia Arfara notes that ‘the child’s forgiveness of his father is a tragic act that transgresses the Law and thus cannot be perceived within a realistic context’.⁷³ Such a questioning of the perception of realism seems to pertain to the context of this chapter (and indeed the wider thesis), as the implications of realism’s impossibility regarding the staging of an image could connect to a sense of unstageability. In an analysis of this moment that responds to Arfara’s assertion, Claudia Castellucci describes this moment as a kind of retrospective dismantling of the father by the son, where the son ‘begins to unroll the reality of the Father’s creation’.⁷⁴ Castellucci here entwines the son and father characters in *Purgatorio* with the ‘all-powerful Father’ and ‘the Son – his own likeness’, evoking images of the Christian God and Christ figures.⁷⁵ The idea of the son unrolling the reality of the father is very relevant to this chapter’s central concern: that, in the twenty-first century, a certain refusal to accept that there is an unstageable is present in the work *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*. That the reality is being unrolled here suggests a sense of the disarrangement of what has previously been thought of as reality, and the staging of this unrolling. Taking this point further, it could be conjectured that Arfara and Castellucci are indicating that such a staging invokes the

⁷³ Katia Arfara, ‘Instance: La Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Purgatory* (2008)’ in Sarah Bay-Cheng and others eds., *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 113.

⁷⁴ Castellucci, 2008.

⁷⁵ Castellucci, 2008.

fragmentation of the possibilities of the unstageable. Arfara suggests that *Purgatorio* stages an image that ‘cannot be perceived within a realistic context’, Castellucci that the staging of this moment dismantles reality in a way. The emphasis here on the idea of un-reality, yet staging, resonates with the notion that the unstageable appears as a paradoxical absence, in *Purgatorio* and elsewhere in the company’s work.

Returning to the aural staging, it seems that this image constitutes a combination of many impossibilities for its creators and critics. Claudia Castellucci refers to ‘unforgivable evil’ and Nicholas Ridout to ‘unbearable action’.⁷⁶ Alan Read notes that ‘the act was unspeakable’.⁷⁷ In the interests of this chapter, I venture an additional impossibility. This act seems, for Societas Raffaello Sanzio, to approach a sense of the unstageable in a number of ways. Firstly, the visual aspect of the scene takes place offstage, reminiscent, perhaps, of scenes of violence in Greek tragedy. Indeed, violence in ancient Greek theatre could perhaps be read as a kind of proto-unstageability, or as an early form of closet drama, as these moments were described in the plays by witnesses and never seen by the audience.⁷⁸ Additionally, the scope of this thesis does not allow for a full exploration of either ancient Greek drama or closet drama (though the latter is examined to some extent in Chapter One), and an onstage description, during a staged piece of theatre, of something that has happened offstage, moves away from the aspect of the unstageable that the thesis undertakes to examine. With this in mind, though the situation of the visual aspect of the scene offstage suggests something that is unstaged rather than unstageable, the descriptions by other

⁷⁶ Castellucci, 2008; Nicholas Ridout, ‘Creating worlds’, *Purgatorio* Playbill, Barbican Centre, London (2009).

⁷⁷ Read, p. 257.

⁷⁸ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 194.

scholars above, all based on impossibilities, allow a discussion to open up whereby the unstaged is perhaps unstageable.

I mention the visual aspect of the scene and how it is staged because, in contrast to the ancient Greek convention, or to the scene remaining entirely unstaged, the son's abuse by the father is staged aurally by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. The staging is, as Lyn Gardner describes in a review of the piece for the *Guardian* newspaper, 'prolonged [and] brutal'.⁷⁹ As Read continues, 'the deep-throated imperative "Open your mouth!" punctuates screams, cries and paternal groans'.⁸⁰ This staging allows our ears to spectate, even though our eyes are reading the contradictory directions projected onto the scrim, as described above. Thinking through this aural staging, and building on the two moments from *BR.#04* discussed above, I venture that Societas Raffaello Sanzio again create a sense of the refusal to allow the image to remain unstageable, through the staging of this scene. The difference between this example and those examined as part of *BR.#04* is, for me, the auality. Again, the 'fall' into representation is certainly in evidence, both in Gardner's review of 'one of the most harrowing and provocative scenes [she has] ever experienced in the theatre' and in a further example from Read below.⁸¹

Regarding another aspect of the staging of this scene, Arfara, in an 'instance' in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, discusses *Purgatorio* in terms of the ways in which the device of projecting stage directions onto the scrim separates the audience

⁷⁹ Lyn Gardner, 'Review: Purgatorio', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2009.

⁸⁰ Read, p. 256.

⁸¹ Gardner, 'Review: Purgatorio'.

from the performers, from the ‘stars’, as they are called in the surtitles.⁸² The projecting of both dialogue and stage directions are, for Arfara, a method whereby ‘the spectator is distanced from the phenomenological perception of the performance as a real-time experience’.⁸³ However, in an example that complicates Arfara’s analysis, and indeed the implication that Societas Raffaello Sanzio are constructing a real world and a virtual world in *Purgatorio*, Read describes a moment during the piece where a spectator did not subscribe to Arfara’s notion that the audience could separate themselves from witnessing the scene in real time. Read notes that a man, ‘at the reappearance of the father on the landing after the abuse bellowed out: “Was that good, was it?”’⁸⁴ This spectatorial venting of anger, for me, does not recognise any of the distancing suggested by Arfara, and certainly suggests a ‘perception of the performance as a real-time experience’.⁸⁵

This example is also additional evidence with which to discuss the notion that Societas Raffaello Sanzio, in their staging, show the seemingly unstageable to be refutable. The spectator in question appears to have registered the performance’s (offstage) action and aural staging as unbearable or unwatchable for him (Read relates that the spectator left the performance shortly after this ‘bellow’). In a similar way to the audience’s recognition of the fractional amplification of the diegetic sound on the stage at the beginning of *Purgatorio*, this forceful statement by the spectator recognises its staging, and, for my purpose here, its refusal of the theatrical image as unstageable. Concurrently, in a comparison with the audiences at *BR.#04*, particularly

⁸² *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* is structured to include a number of ‘instances’ where the writers reflect briefly on performances they have seen in relation to the theme of intermediality.

⁸³ Arfara, p. 112.

⁸⁴ Read, p. 257.

⁸⁵ Arfara, p. 112.

regarding reactions to the beating scene as described above, it is interesting to note that the spectator waits for the father's return before interjecting, and does not leave during the aural staging mentioned above. Again, it is as if there is an anticipation of some sort of unstageability at play. It will not emerge from its non-existence here, it remains absent, but perhaps this spectator at *Purgatorio* waits, past the point of departure under other circumstances, for something called unstageable to appear and put a stop to that to which his reaction has been so strong.

I will close this discussion of *Purgatorio* with a last acknowledgement of its title. The significance of Limbo, used to describe the destiny of babies who died before baptism, has been modified in the Catholic Church's teachings in recent years, notably via the publication in 2007 of the International Theological Commission's comprehensively-titled document, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*. However, in his discussion of the slowly-passing images, the 'repertoire of shifting scales' visible through the boy's porthole in the final part of *Purgatorio*, Alan Read ruefully notes 'the Vatican Council's cancellation of Limbo' in terms of its re-confirmation of belief in Purgatory as 'all we have to look forward to'.⁸⁶ Much like the surtitles projected onto the scrim in the earlier part of the piece, these final images, culminating in the father's dance, and the lowering of the ringed lens to our line of sight, appear to present another reminder of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's seeming responsibility to the staging of a theatrical image, rather than to declare it to be unstageable. Thus, *Purgatorio*'s staging, both onstage and offstage, have created a space for the now-fragmented possibilities of this unstageable.

⁸⁶ Read, p. 258.

Conclusions

This chapter was initially concerned with questions of historically contextualising the contemporary moment. It seemed that a problematising of the model of historical contextualisation utilised thus far in the thesis would provide a productive way of exploring the possibilities of the unstageable in the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, beginning to articulate a twenty-first century approach to questions of unstageability. For me, the opening out of these contextual ideas has suggested a particular relationship with these possibilities as they emerge, fragmented, in some examples drawn from the company's recent work. For example, it is interesting to note a sense that the fragmentation of unstageability in this particular case can be shown to be operating in opposition to Adorno's notion of the impossibility of art in the post-Holocaust world. Though this idea will be returned to in the thesis conclusion, it seems worthwhile to note here that, as well as past historical contexts and/or shifts in artistic practice through which the possibilities of the unstageable could be said to emerge, there could be a similar articulation of a continuing sense of unstageability that operates around the terms to which Didi-Huberman alludes in his discussion of the survival of images from Auschwitz. Thus, the result could be not a historical exploration of the possibilities of the unstageable, but a contemporary engagement with the staging or not of an image, and perhaps the refusal to think in terms of stageable or unstageable. This allows for a twenty-first century sense of unstageability that moves beyond its historical evocation in the first two case studies. Indeed, as suggested towards the opening of this chapter, it seems that the function of a fragmented sense of unstageability in the twenty-first century could also be seen to operate in a futurological way, creating momentum for future expressions of theatre and performance.

I have also attempted to examine the ways in which Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work presents some particular conditions for such a discussion of unstageability. Using examples from their recent work, I have followed two intertwining lines of questioning. The first thinks through the 'fall into representation' by the spectator, a concept that the co-founders of Societas Raffaello Sanzio have expressed regarding *Tragedia Endogonidia*, specifically in relation to the idea that the communication of information to the audience causes the spectator to '[crash] emotionally into a representation that has neither narrative nor logical context'.⁸⁷ This emotional crash into representation (despite that representation's adherence or otherwise to perceived conventions of naturalistic representation) is, for me, an interesting point of connection with the idea of unstageability in terms of the work of the audience of Societas Raffaello Sanzio in their particular context. It seems that a link can be made between a twenty-first century spectator's seemingly involuntary response to the company's work, and the notion of the refusal of unstageability. By this I mean that, as certain kinds of experimental theatre continue to move beyond narrative and/or logical contexts in their construction of work, the audience of this work is presented with the challenge to attempt to spectate beyond the way they might at the kind of drama that Edward Braun has described as 'the bourgeois theatre of escapism and illusion'.⁸⁸ This presents an interesting contrast, in the case of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, when the spectator of the beating scene in *Tragedia Endogonidia* is reminded of the representation (and its refusal of unstageability) in multiple ways, and still, as mentioned, 'crashes' into representation. For me, this articulates an opportunity to

⁸⁷ Castellucci and others, p. 117

⁸⁸ Quoted in Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 6.

think about the work of the audience in their particular context, and perhaps the changing nature of such work.

The second line of questioning explores the idea that Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work fragments previous understandings of the possibilities of the unstageable as articulated so far in this thesis. However, paradoxically, in a refusal to accept unstageability, Societas Raffaello Sanzio seem to articulate the continuing presence of something called unstageable, in order for certain theatre makers to show that its possibilities can be refused. This reading of their work combines the writings of Didi-Huberman with the examples of Societas Raffaello Sanzio's curation of their own contemporary context, to suggest that a post-Holocaust context allows a sense of the unstageable to emerge in a paradoxical refusal of its possibilities. This also continues the idea, pursued across the thesis so far, that there could be a counterpart to the concept of 'representing the unrepresentable', or 'representing that there is some representable' (after Lyotard), that is explored in a range of modernist theatre practices. This counterpart presents an exploration of the possibilities of the unstageable in examples of theatre that are concerned with various aspects of naturalistic representation in one way or another. In the case of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, the disintegration of narrative and logic in much of their work nevertheless provides interesting ground for a discussion of the relationship between representation and a certain disavowal of unstageabilities.

Conclusion

Tilling the soil

In exploring such a wide-ranging topic as unstageability, it has been necessary throughout this thesis to assign limits and confines to the material I have consulted, the arguments I have constructed, and the choice of examples with which I have illustrated my research and thoughts. While this concluding section aims to note the work that the thesis has done, acknowledging its implications and suggesting its further advancements, it must also note these limitations of content and form. Far from a recognition of scope or capacity, though I have at times conceded to both above, the parameters of this study, as mentioned throughout, have been shaped by discussions of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of synchrony, as well as Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the philosophy of history. A postscript to this methodology comes once more from the work of Benjamin, in an essay called 'The Storyteller'. Towards the start of this essay, Benjamin considers two types, or 'tribes' of storyteller.¹ The first is a traveller, who arrives from far away, and tells stories of what they have seen in other places. The second remains at home, in the same place, and tells the stories they know from their own locality. Describing these two kinds of storytellers in terms of 'their archaic representatives', Benjamin goes on to portray the former type as a 'trading seaman', the latter as 'the resident tiller of the soil'.² This image of someone tilling the soil, turning over what is already there and seeking to explore it more thoroughly, recalls my limit of frame on a very big subject, and the tilling of particular terms and ideas surrounding the notion of unstageability.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 84.

² Benjamin, p. 84.

The thought that unstageability might have more to do with theatre than with anything else, though many of the ideas I have traced have come from philosophy and history, led me to question the existing body of research and writing in this area with what could be thought of as a literal interpretation, the more clearly to articulate the kind of contextual unstageability to which this thesis refers. Nicholas Ridout, writing in another context about his own way of working in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, notes that '[he tends] to assume that when someone writes the word theatre, they mean theatre'.³ For me, Ridout's reference to his project as 'very literal-minded' in this way modestly belies his sophisticated exploration of some of the idiosyncrasies and anomalies that arise in the production and reception of theatre and performance.⁴ However, the idea of literalness appeals, and I find that there is something very literal-minded about my project, too. The idea that when critics wrote reviews of plays and called them unstageable, they might mean unstageable, was part of the initial inspiration for this thesis, as I began to explore what else might be at play in this word that seemed to be more than just a turn of phrase.

Not stageable

Thus, the primary research area I have been working through over the course of this project centres on a questioning of the possibilities of the unstageable in examples of theatre and performance drawn from the late nineteenth century to the present day. In defining this sense of the unstageable in historical, philosophical and theatrical terms, I find it necessary in this concluding section to articulate the difference

³ Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 34.

⁴ Ridout, p. 34.

between unstageable and not stageable. For me, the not stageable relates to the wide range of logistical, economic and ethical factors often imposed on theatre and performance in its preparation or production. For example, contemporary concerns with health and safety, with the assessment of risk and the provision of insurance, with security, control and legality, frequently result in the not stageable. Nor are such concerns limited to twenty-first century practice. For example, Alan Read writes in *Theatre and Everyday Life* about Walter Roth's programme for 'theatre hygiene' in Britain. This document, published in 1888, is replete with assumptions, as Read notes, that 'theatre is an histrionic delusion, a semblance of life...an illusion above all else', and as Roth notes, that the theatre-goer could not possibly be expected to suspend their disbelief while sitting in 'too small' seats in cramped, draughty theatres.⁵ Roth's concern that a more sanitary environment in the theatre would allow for the experience of 'scenic illusion' is for me a marker, conducive with the timespan of my thesis, of an early attempt to articulate the not stageable.⁶ In the twenty-first century, the difficulty of securing funding for theatre and performance artists, combined with a deep anxiety with finding performance 'offensive', shored up by the 2003 Licensing Act, are examples of challenges that have deepened the possibilities of the not stageable.⁷

⁵ Alan Read, *Theatre & Everyday Life: an ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 209.

⁶ Read, p. 206-11. Also, John J. Parkinson-Bailey, *Manchester: an architectural history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 124. A comparable point could be Henry Irving's 'safety theatre', made manifest in his collaboration with the architect Alfred Darbyshire, the Irving-Darbyshire Safety Theatre, the principles of which began to appear in theatres from 1884 Parkinson-Bailey here expands on the asbestos safety curtain and emergency exits at the heart of the Irving-Darbyshire Safety Plan, as well as the plan's implementation in the Comedy Theatre in 1884, also its subsequent application to theatres across the country following a fire at the Theatre Royal, Exeter in September 1887.

⁷ A recent example of the latter could be Thomas John Bacon's *Tempting Failure* exhibition, due to take place at the Bierkeller, Bristol on 4th March 2012. Seven weeks before the event, the venue cancelled the programme. Quoting the email sent to Bacon by the Bierkeller, 'after having the act breakdowns reviewed by a licensing lawyer and in-house staff, we

Concurrent to an understanding of the kinds of limits and constraints on theatre and performance that were relevant to this thesis' concerns, was an articulation of the linguistic trajectory from notions of the sublime as discussed by Longinus in the first century AD, through to Rancière and Lyotard's evocations of the unrepresentable and unrepresentable respectively. This orientation, the contextual bedrock of my central thesis, moved through ideas of strong or overwhelming feeling on the part of the spectator of language, of nature, of architecture, of art, a feeling that variously engenders a sense of the incapacity of the mind to grasp the totality of the image being offered, or indeed the incapacity of art to fully articulate, arriving at a theatrically-specific iteration of the Rancièrian notion that unrepresentability can arise in the movement between political, social, historical and/or artistic developments. Thus, the work of the spectator in their particular context became crucial to my exploration of the possibilities of the unstageable, defined by me in terms of a theatrical sense or condition of Rancièrian unrepresentability.

Historical shifts

In terms of a more specific definition of unstageability, building on the context and background described, it became clear to me over the course of the research that there is an extent to which it is only possible to identify the unstageable in terms of something staged. By this I mean that the historical nature of the kind of unstageability to which I refer potentially allows the spectator, practitioner and/or scholar to imagine a future when something unstageable will be stageable, or

found two acts... to be unsuitable for us to host. The focus on nudity, body modification, bleeding, urination, urinating on other artists, and exchange of bodily fluids (between both artist and audience), we believe, would have compromised the legal standing, our artistic remit, relationship with our landlords, and licensing entitlement that we currently hold.' Manick Govinda, 'Licensed to censor performance art', *Spiked*, 16 January 2012, <http://www.spiked-online.com/site/printable/11978/> [accessed 13 May 2013]

disavow a past when something was stageable that is now unstageable, or indeed to disavow the notion of unstageability altogether. This arguably exposes a certain need for unstageability, for something that we call unstageable despite the myriad possibilities of the staged and the stageable in theatre and performance of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following this line of thought, unstageability could be said to have a particular momentum for future theatre and performance, a momentum that encourages thought about Bojana Kunst's definition of the future when she describes it as being situated 'in a rupture between something which has not happened and something which has yet to happen'.⁸

Further to this, my research has also established an enquiry into why a language connected with unstageability emerges at particular times. This has suggested to me that specific moments of theatrical crisis seem to create an environment where the description of something as unstageable that has been staged is intensified. This sense of 'crisis' does not necessarily refer to the notion of danger or disaster, but to attempts to acknowledge turning points and significant moments of change. If Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* constitutes a paradigm shift at the tipping point of what was previously a legitimate Romantic theatre; if the Grand-Guignol represents a shift in popular forms of theatre and performance practice; if Societas Raffaello Sanzio's work responds to a shift away from a particular definition of twenty-first century avant-garde/postmodern performance; the question of the identification of unstageability in terms of something staged can be connected to these points and shifts.

⁸ Bojana Kunst, 'On Potentiality and the Future of Performance', <http://kunstbody.wordpress.com/2009/03/13/on-potentiality-and-the-future-of-performance/> [accessed 15 June 2013]

Hovering about the cusp

In a monograph dedicated to a particular range of contemporary performance practices that have emerged between modernity and postmodernity (between Brecht and Baudrillard, as he would have it), Baz Kershaw notes that ‘hovering about the cusp of a paradigm shift...is currently the only viable ideological option’.⁹

Throughout *The Radical in Performance*, Kershaw mines his examples for the kind of radicalism that might illuminate ‘the great political, ethical, genetic and ecological issues confronting the world at the start of the twenty-first century’.¹⁰ Though he acknowledges that the location of the cusp may, like postmodernity itself, be a fiction, shot through with ambivalences and contradictions, Kershaw remains dedicated to the usefulness of ‘stay[ing] resolutely astride’ the paradigms of modernity and postmodernity in order to articulate his argument from a position of juxtaposition rather than alignment.¹¹ Crucially, with awareness of the Foucauldian historical/epistemic rupture and the Kuhnian paradigm shift, Kershaw notes that the difficulty of being able to spot such a rupture or shift (and, by extension, cusp) in its contemporary moment could suggest that postmodernity itself may not be worthy of ‘full paradigmatic status’.¹²

This sense of remaining around the cusp is relevant to my work on the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge at particular historical junctures. Such possibilities of the unstageable as discussed in this thesis, rely on an exploration of a shift between one historical-theatrical context and another, and/or between one set of

⁹ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 20.

¹⁰ Kershaw, p. 8.

¹¹ Kershaw, p. 8.

¹² Kershaw, p. 22.

artistic practices and another. Across the thesis, I have explored *Peer Gynt* at the interstices of Romanticism and Modernism, the demise of Grand-Guignol between the post-Second World War period and the 1960s, and the twenty-first century work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio in relation to a post-Holocaust context, and tentatively as anticipatory of a certain historical futurology. Again, while not specifically templating the kind of rupture that Foucault suggests, I continue to think that there could be significances to these cusps as articulated in the above chapters, not for the sake of the terms on either side of any of the examples, but in an effort to historically contextualise the notion of the unstageable as it appears at a particular point in time.

As I have mentioned, these three particular examples connected to each other and to my research topic in a specific way. Considering the possibilities of the unstageable as a peculiarly modernist concern, these examples were positioned in such a way that allowed me to explore the topic from a variety of perspectives, mirroring Modernism's multi-faceted capacities. I have attempted to do this while remaining apart from claims of adequacies for terms such as Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism and so on, apart from an awareness of what Raymond Williams refers to as 'the sharpest realization of the difficulties of any kind of definition'.¹³ The work, from my point of view, was to note the possibilities of the unstageable around these movements and terms, articulating the emergence of such possibilities not necessarily as a product of one artistic movement or another, but often as an outcome of shifts taking place along their cusps, or indeed within the movements themselves.

¹³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p. 15.

Illustrating the possibilities

Additionally, it seems that this thesis, in its exploration of a small number of instances of unstageability, raises the question of the importance of these particular moments. For me, an answer to this question presents an aspect of the thesis' contribution to knowledge. While the history of theatre has been well documented from a variety of angles, the slippery nature of the term 'unstageable' has meant that the history of what has been challenging or impossible to stage at any particular time has become sidelined, usually visible only as a counterpart to successful staging. The term's resistance to history in this way recalls Heiner Müller's assertion that the task of dramatic literature is to offer resistance to the theatre, has required an attempt at a new method of thinking about this history. Looking at the wide-ranging, yet specific examples I have presented, it seems that a crucial aspect of unstageability is its contextual nature. What is unstageable at a particular time, on a particular stage, becomes significant, and the resonance of this methodology of study with notions of the Saussurean synchronic becomes clearer. This method has allowed me to uncover unusual moments for theatre, moments where its own limitations were challenged in various ways, for a variety of contextual reasons.

Throughout the thesis, I have been suggesting that the unstageable can also be considered as a counterpart to the notion of representing the unrepresentable, as articulated philosophically by Rancière, theatrically by Modernist writers such as Beckett and Ionesco, and critically by scholars such as Martin Puchner. This appears to be a convincing model of approach, as the unstageability to which I have referred here has been historically attached to evocations of theatrical realism. With this conventionally theatrical attention to the verisimilitude of representation in place, the

possibilities of the unstageable arise in relation to historical context, as distinct from the form of built-in ‘suspicion’ of the theatre that those who attempt to represent the unrepresentable, or that there is an unrepresentable, can be shown to express. Thus, the thesis has attempted to explore a sense of unstageability that is distinct from anti-theatricality, while remaining in the same time period as the examples of anti-theatricality that have been referred to, and thinking through unstageability from within a certain frame of realistic representation.

During my exploration of this topic, I began to note that the discussion of unstageability that arose in the situation of historical examples in their particular theatrical-historical contexts, clashed with contemporary notions of unstageable as I encountered them. This has been articulated in the first two case studies, particularly in terms of the final stages of each of those chapters. In the situation of *Peer Gynt* and the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in twenty-first century contexts, revolving around my own spectatorship and that of other critics, it seemed that both examples departed from the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerged in historical contexts. For me, this has allowed for an exploration of the unconsidered use of the word (and associated terms) in the twenty-first century, and an attempted rehabilitation of these terms in particular contexts. In the case of the third chapter, the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio has been shown to, in a way, refute the notion of unstageability in a post-Holocaust context, further fragmenting the idea.

Future possibilities

The thesis does not seek to provide an exhaustive overview of implications of unstageability in all possible contexts, or of the complexities inherent in

unstageability as a concept. All such references, along with related allusions to possible definitions of unstageability, are intended to be located within a specific context, that of observing some of the possibilities of the unstageable as they emerge in particular theatrical-historical situations. In the case of unstageability, there is considerable need for further work to be produced which, by reviewing existing materials, seeks to establish other (extensive and provisional) models of an approaches this word, particularly in terms of its correlation to theatre.

For example, and to return to Peggy Phelan, I continue to be interested in another aspect of her assertion that writing for performance attempts ‘to extend the oxymoronic possibilities of animating the unlived that lies at the heart of performance as a making’.¹⁴ I am thinking of the notion of ‘possibility’ here in terms of its definition as a ‘capability of existing, happening, or being done (in general, or under particular conditions)’.¹⁵ For me, this recalls the idea that a dramatic text is, among other things, a suggestion of an event to be staged, and that arguably the writer of any playtext creates a world that may never appear on the stage for which it is intended. Thus, perhaps it would be possible to conjecture, in another context, that a performance text of any kind is always unstageable, whether implicitly or explicitly. This point is articulated by Sarah Kane in an interview in 1998:

At one point I ask about the chorus of rats that infests *Cleansed* and she [Kane] shrugs mischievously: ‘I don’t know what James (her director) will do about them. I have to say, I’m glad it’s not my problem’. Then, almost dreamily, she adds, ‘There’s a Jacobean play with a stage direction, “Her spirit rises out of her body and walks away, leaving her body behind”. Anyway, Shakespeare has a bear running across the stage in *A Winter’s Tale* and his stagecraft was perfect, so I don’t know why I can’t have rats’.¹⁶

¹⁴ Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, eds., *The Ends of Performance* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), p. 13.

¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com> [13 June 2013].

¹⁶ Claire Armistead, ‘No pain, no Kane’, *Guardian*, 29 April 1998.

Thinking further on this challenge from literature to theatre, highlighted by Kane and already briefly discussed in this thesis' introduction in relation to Heiner Müller, it seems that a further pathway of research for questions of unstageability could lie in a questioning of these possibilities of an ever-present, always-already unstageable, and perhaps specifically how these possibilities could be articulated for work that is fundamentally devised (with or without a script-writer). In many kinds of devised performance work, the possibilities of the work are tried out in conversation and in the rehearsal space, rather than in the playwright's imagination. A playtext's possibilities for staging exist already and yet do not exist, and in some sense the script might be described as paradoxically both always stageable and always unstageable. In the case of devised work, these staging possibilities operate similarly, though usually through the body or the voice. Rather than thinking of these possibilities as ephemera of missed opportunities or discarded ideas, it could perhaps be possible to articulate a theory of the creative unstageable (or the creating unstageable) that traces these implicit and explicit unstageabilities.

Additionally, in terms of the work I have done in this thesis, another approach to future research into unstageability could be a historical examination of seemingly unstageable stage directions specifically from a technical or logistical perspective. Applying the idea that the possibilities of the unstageable emerge in relation to the specific theatrical-historical context of the example under discussion, it could be feasible to discuss particular stage directions in various contexts, and thus to explore the expanding technical and logistical capabilities of the theatre, and its limits. With this in mind, a theoretical focus on the challenge presented from literature to theatre

(and from playwright to director, or from playwright to designer and technical team) could allow for a focus on the logistical reading of the stage direction and the theatre technology themselves as agents of meaning. For example, Geraint D’Arcy has argued for the establishment of an ‘aesthetic language for theatre technology’, encouraging a reading of theatre technology as a textual aspect of performance, as distinct from a support system or mechanism of theatrical realisation.¹⁷ Historical unstageability in this logistical capacity could thus explore the ongoing development of the staging possibilities of the theatre, while articulating moments of unstageability via the synchronic model I have suggested.

Thematically, it seems that the representation of violence in the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol and the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio could be addressed in a future context, in terms of the potential unwatchability of violence for spectators, the unspeakable nature of certain kinds of violence, and the articulation of such violence via staging in twentieth and twenty-first century theatre. The discussion of historical unstageability in this thesis could support such an exploration in terms of the articulation of the theatrically-specific aspects of unrepresentability noted above, and also in relation to the post-Holocaust context developed in relation to Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s particular relationship with the possibilities of the unstageable. While the thesis’ treatment of *Peer Gynt* would contribute in a contrasting way to a discussion of this kind, the first case study’s exploration of Ibsen’s work on the text in conversation with Grieg could be seen as a certain violence upon the play, though it would be difficult to reconcile this very different evocation of violence with the kinds of corporeal violence suggested in the other two examples. Instead, in this

¹⁷ Geraint D’Arcy, ‘Towards an Aesthetics of Theatre Technology’, PhD dissertation, The University of Glamorgan, 2011, p. 23.

thesis, I have sought to explore an alternative throughline, hoping to articulate questions of unstageability in relation to particular kinds of theatrical realism, tracing the twentieth century's path through Modernism while offering a counterpart to other aspects of the movement's exploration of impossibilities.

Unexpected conclusions

A more surprising observation has been an articulation of the negative space of unstageability in a positive light in the twenty-first century. I found at the beginning of this research that the word unstageable, as used in reviews of performance and in descriptions of playwrights including Eugene O'Neill and Federico García Lorca. However, this utilisation of a term, usually in relation to the challenges of particular stage directions, frequently seemed to operate on the implication that staging had failed in some way, that the theatre had betrayed the text in its inability to stage. However, throughout this work, I have found that, as the exploration of the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio attempted to show in particular, the possibilities of the unstageable and their subsequent refusal can be seen as supportive of unstageability, in the sense that such a refusal can only be measured in terms of its distance from wider ways in which the term is considered in the twenty-first century (to borrow from Elinor Fuchs' model of postmodern theatres). By this I mean that an aspect of the unstageable seems to exist in the twenty-first century in a way that allows certain theatre and performance work to refuse its possibilities, operating from a post-Holocaust sense of responsibility to stage.

Further to this, another unexpected conclusion was that the idea of unstageability initially presented itself as a delicate and ephemeral topic. However, it has become

clear that the changing nature of unstageability, operating particularly in terms of theatrical-historical context, is distinct from ideas of ephemerality. Despite the deep connection between the possibilities of the unstageable and the theatrical-historical context of the example under discussion, the resilience of the word and the concept, even in a fragmented form in the twenty-first century, speaks to a more robust idea than was clear at the outset of the project, though its essential nature has been shown to be linked to supposition and specificity. I return, finally, to this understanding of supposition, articulated in terms of Stanislavski's 'magic if' at the beginning of this thesis as an initial departure point, and informing throughout the sense of questioning and exploration inherent to this work. This notion of supposition, which allows for a sense of conviction 'without taking a lie for the truth', has allowed me to articulate the idea that, if there is an unstageable, its possibilities emerge in particular contexts, and these possibilities continue to illuminate an additional feature of the ways we have staged in the past, and will stage in the future.¹⁸

¹⁸ Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 33.

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